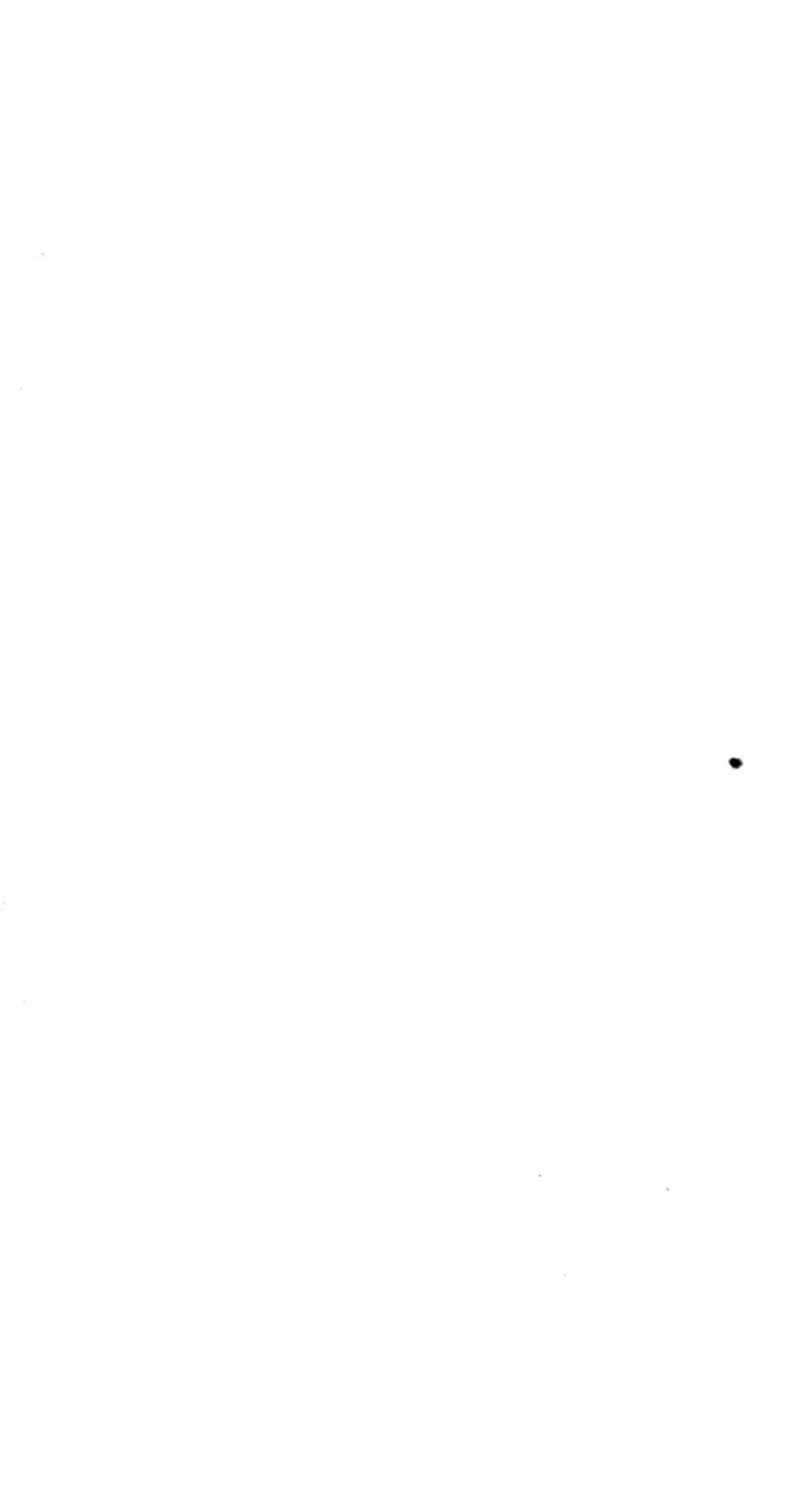




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BOOK





STRATHMORE

A Romance.

BY OUIDA.

There are depths in Man that go the lengths of lowest Hell, as there are heights that reach highest Heaven; for are not both Heaven and Hell made out of him, made by him, everlasting Miracle and Mystery that he is?

Oblivion cannot be hired.—SIR THOMAS BROWNE'S "*Urn Burial*."

CARLYLE.

Good and evil we know, in the field of this world, grow up together almost inseparably; and the knowledge of good is so involved and interwoven with the knowledge of evil, that those confused seeds which were imposed upon Psyche as an incessant labour to cull out and sort asunder were not more intermixed.—MILTON.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

CHAPMAN AND HALL, 193, PICCADILLY.

1865.

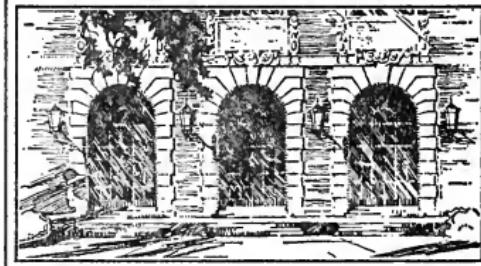
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TO THE READER.

A PREFACE too often provokes the reader to exclaim against it, what Cowley's silver pen wrote against the little word "but;"—that "it is *aerugo mera*, a rust that spoils the metal it grows upon." Nevertheless, as "but" may sometimes be the precursor of a clearer exposition of an argument, so a preface may perhaps be, here and there, the herald to a clearer understanding between a writer and his public. I have but a few words with which to prelude these volumes; and I do not entreat any critic to forbear divulging the plot in his remarks upon them. It is but a poor work which depends, like a conundrum, on the concealment of its catchword and secret, for the maintenance of its interest: whatever attraction may lie in this romance, I have preferred seeking to centre in the sketching of character, the

John Moore

development of temperament, and the issue of action. If it allure any reader, I would hope that such allure-
ment will rest, not on the skeleton of its outline, but
in the manner in which that outline is filled in and
coloured.

I have given Strathmore purposely for what he is ;
a deeply erring man. I trust this will be remembered,
and that people will not, therefore, express a supreme
astonishment that he acts in consonance with such a
character. If I wrote of a blind man, I could scarcely
make him walk unerringly by the clear light of day ;
yet the public sometimes seem to look for such an
anomaly, and expect a guilty man to act in all things
like a demi-god. I have drawn in Strathmore one
who, trusting in his own strength, fell by his own
passions. I have screened nothing, excused nothing,
palliated nothing. I have not softened the dark sha-
dows that lie on a dark path. I have simply endea-
voured to depict the insecurity of a haughty pride which
held itself sufficient shield against all temptation ; the
inevitable steps by which one sin always leads onward
to another ; and the retribution, unseen of men, which
rose out of the wilful guilt of a self-sustained and
too arrogant life.

If it be objected that in the woman who occupies a
considerable place in these pages, crime wears too

poetic and graceful a mask, I would answer that it is precisely this disguise in which it steals fatally into natures that otherwise would not succumb to it. Crime in its naked viciousness and coarseness has its least danger, and its open warning; I have sought to show that its darkest depths may underlie a bright seductive surface, as the volcanic line of the earthquake runs under a laughing and flowering landscape. The cruelty and the vices of Theodora did not prevent the loveliness of her face, nor the sway for nigh thirty years of her fascinations over Justinian. Women, perhaps, may resent the portrayal of Marion Vavasour; I regret that their sex has too often shown the truth of it. For the rest, I have no more to add; if there be any favour I would be inclined to ask of my reviewer, or my reader, it would be, not to judge of the work by any scattered fragments, but only as a whole; having followed it to the end, and having brought to its perusal the remembrance that human life is no flower of paradise, but a warped tree earth-stained in its growth, of which, as I have written later on, in the old well-known words:

sed quantum vertice ad auras
Ætherias, tantum radice in Tartara tendit.

London, May, 1865.

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STRATHMORE.

CHAPTER I.

WHITE LADIES.

WHITE LADIES did not mean snowdrops, by their pretty old English name, ghosts in white cere-clothes, or belles in white tarlatan. It was only an old densely-wooded estate down in one of those counties that give Creswick his cool chequered shade and wild forest streams, his shallow sunny brooks, and picturesque roadsides; but which, I am told by superior taste, are terribly insipid and miserably tame, with many other epithets I do not care to repeat, having a lingering weakness myself for the old bridle-paths with the boughs meeting above head, the hawthorn hedges powdered with their snowy blossom, and the rich meadow lands with their tall grasses, and clover, and cowslips, where cattle stand up to their hocks in fresh wild thyme, and shadows lengthen slowly and lazily through long summer days.

White Ladies was an ancient and stately abbey, the last relic of lands once wide and numerous as Warwick's ere he fell at Gladsmoor Heath ; a single possession—though that lordly enough—where it had been but one among a crowded beadroll of estates which had stretched over counties before they were parcelled out and divided, some amongst the hungry courtiers who fattened upon abbey lands ; some among the Hanoverian rabble, who scrambled for the goodly spoils of loyal gentlemen ; some, later on, among the vampires of Israel, who, like their forefather and first usurer, Jacob, know well how to treat with the famished, and sell us our mess of pottage at no smaller price than our birthright.

In the days of Monkery and of Holy Church, White Ladies had been a great Dominican monastery, rich in its wealth and famous in its sanctity ; though since then the great Gothic pile had been blasted with petronels, burned with flame, and rid-dled with the bullets of the Ironsides. Yet, when the western sun slanted in flecks of gold through the boughs of the wych-elms, and fell on the panes of the blazoned windows, or the moonlight streaming across the sward, gleamed through the pointed arches and aisles, and down the ivy-covered cloisters, the abbey had still a stately and solemn beauty, given to it in ancient times by the cunning hand of master masons, when men built for art and not for greed, and lavished love in lieu of lusting gold, when they worked for a long lifetime to leave some imperishable

record of their toil, and were grandly heedless how their names might perish and be forgot. It stood down in deep secluded western valleys on the borders of the sea, shut in by dense forest lands which covered hill and dale for miles about it, and sheltered in their recesses the dun deer in their coverts and the grey herons by their pools; a silent, solitary, royal place, where the axe never sounded among the centenarian trees, and the sylvan glory was never touched by the Vandal of time and the Goth of steam, that elsewhere are swiftly sapping what Tudor iconoclasts spared, and destroying what Puritan petards left free.

Through the elm-boughs that swayed against the carvings with which Norman builders had enriched the pile; through the tangled ivy that hid where Cromwell's breach had blasted, and where Henry's troops had sacked; through the heraldic blazonries upon the panes, where the arms of the Strathmores with their fierce motto, "*Slay, and spare not!*" were stained, the summer sun shone into one of the chambers at White Ladies.

In olden days, and turn by turn as time went on and fortunes changed, the chamber had been the audience-place of the Lord Abbot, where he had received high nobles who sought the sanctuary because the price of blood was on their heads, or thriftless kings of Plantagenet who came to pray the aid of Mother Church for largesse to their troops ere they

set sail for Palestine. It had been the bower-room of a captive queen, where Mary had sat over her tapestry thinking of the years so long gone by, when on her soft childish brow, fair with the beauty of Stuart and Guise, the astrologer had seen the taint of foreshadowed woe and the presage of death under the soft golden curls. It had been the favourite haunt of Court beauties where they had read the last paper of Spec, and pondered over new pulvillios, and rejoiced that the peace had been made at Utrecht, to bring them the French mode and Paris chocolate, and thought in their secretly-disaffected hearts of the rising that was fomenting among the gallant gentlemen of the North, and of the cypher letter lying under the lace in their bosoms from one brave to rashness, and thrice well-beloved because in danger for the Cause, who was travelling secretly and swiftly to St. Germain.

Now the Plantagenets had died out, root and branch, the tapestry woven by Mary was faded and moth-eaten, the Court beauties were laid in the chapel vault, and the oriel-chamber was scented with Latakia, Manillas, Burgundies, and liqueurs, while three or four men sat at breakfast with a group of retrievers on the hearth. The sun falling through the casements, shone on the brass andirons, the oak carvings, the purple silk of the hangings, and on the game and fruits, coffee and Rhenish, that were crowded in profusion on the table, at which the host and the guests of White Ladies lounged; smoking and looking over

the contents of the letter-bag, peeling an apricot, or cutting into a foie gras, silent, lazy, and inert, for there was nothing to tempt them out but the rabbits, and the morning was warm, and the shaded room pleasant.

At the head of his table the host sat in shadow, where the light of the outer day did not reach, but left the purple hangings of the wall with the dead gold of their embroideries in gloom behind him. He was a man then of nine-and-twenty or thirty, but who looked something older than he was ; he was tall and slightly made, and wore a black velvet morning coat. His face was singularly striking and impressive, more by expression than by feature—it was such a countenance as you see in old Italian portraits, and in some Vandykes, bearing in them power strangely blended with passion, and repose with recklessness ; his hair, moustaches, and beard were of a dark chesnut hue ; his mouth was very beautifully formed, with the smile generous, but rare ; the eyebrows were dark, straight, and finely pencilled ; the eyes grey. And it was in these, when they lightened to steel-like brilliance, or darkened black as night with instantaneous and pitiless anger, that an acute physiognomist would have inferred for him danger, and evil to himself and to others, which would arise from a spring as yet, perhaps, unknown and unsealed ; and that an artist studying his face, in which his art would have found no flaw, would have said that this man would be relentless, and might have predicted, as the Southern sculptor prophesied

of Charles Stuart, “Something evil will befall him. He carries misfortune on his face.”

He lay back in his chair, turning over his letters, looking idly one by one at them, not opening some, and not reading wholly through any; many of them had feminine superscriptions, and scarlet or azure chiffres at the seal, as delicately scented as though they had been brought by some court page, rather than by the rough route of the mail-bag. They afforded him a certain amusement that summer’s morning, and Strathmore of White Ladies—this man with the eyes of a Catiline and the face of a Strafford—had no care greater on his mind for either the present or the future just then than that his keepers had told him the broods were very scanty, and the young birds had died off shockingly in the early parts of the spring; that he was summoned to go on a diplomatic mission to Bulgaria to confer with a crabbed Prince Michel, before he cared to leave England; and that one of his fair correspondents, Nina Montolieu, a Free Companion, whose motto blazoned on her pretty fluttering pennon, was a very rapacious “*tout prendre!*” might be a little more troublesome than was agreeable, and give him a taste of the tenacious griffes now that he had tired of playing with the pattes de velours. He had nothing graver or darker to trouble him, as he leant back in the shade where the sunlight did not come, glancing out now and then to the masses of forest, and the grey cloisters, ivy-hung and crumbling

to ruins, that were given to view through the opened windows of his chamber. His face was the face of a State-conspirator of Velasquez, of a doomed Noble of Vandyke ; but his life was the easy, nonchalant, untroubled, unchequered life of an English gentleman of our days ; and his thoughts were the thoughts that are natural to, and that run in couple with, such a life. “Born to calamity” would have been as little applicable then to Cecil Strathmore as it seemed to Charles of England, when he and Villiers looked into the long eyes of the Spanish donnas and drank to the loveliness of Henriette de Bourbon. But in those joyous, brilliant days of Madrid and Paris, the shadow of the future had not fallen across the threshold of Whitehall,—neither as yet had it fallen here, across the threshold of White Ladies.

He looked up and turned a little in his chair as the door opened, and the smile that was the more brilliant and the more attractive because extremely rare, lighted his face.

“ You incorrigible fellow ! the coffee is cold, and the claret is corked, and the omelettes are overdone, but it’s no more than you deserve. Won’t you *ever* be punctual ? We were going down to Hurst Warren at nine, and it’s now eleven. You are the most idle dog, Erroll, under heaven ! ”

“ You were only down yourself six minutes ago (I asked Craven), so don’t *you* talk, my good fellow. You have been reading the first volume of the ‘Amours d’une Femme,’ and sending the rabbits

to the deuce ; and I've been reading the second, and consigning them to the devil, so we're quits. A summer morning's made for a French novel in bed, with the window open and the birds singing outside ; pastorals and pruriencies go uncommonly nicely together, rather like lemons and rum, you know. Contrasts are always *chic !*"

With which enunciation of doctrine the new comer sat down, rolled his chair up to the table, and began an inspection of some lobster cutlets à la Maréchale, taking a cup of creamy chocolate from the servant behind him, while Strathmore looked at him with a smile still on his lips, and a cordial look in his eyes, as if the mere sound of the other's voice were pleasant to him. The belated guest was a man of his own age, or some few years older ; in frame and sinew he was superb ; in style he was rather like a dashing Free Lance, a gallant debonnair captain of Bourbon's Reiters, with his magnificent muscle and reckless brilliance, though he was as gentle as a woman and as lazy as a Circassian girl. He called himself the handsomest man in the Service, and had the palm given him undisputingly ; for the frank, clear, azure eyes that grew so soft in love, so trustful in friendship, the long fair hair sweeping off a forehead white as the most delicate blonde's, the handsome features with their sunny candour and their gay sensuous smile, made his face almost as attractive to men as to women. As for the latter, indeed, they strewed his path with the conqueror's myrtle-leaves. His loves

were as innumerable as the stars, and by no means so eternal ; and if now and then the beau sexe had the best of the warfare, it was only because they are never compassionate on those who surrender to them at once, and whom they can bind and lead captive at their will, which the least experienced could do at one stroke with Bertie Erroll, as he freely and lamentingly confessed. The Beau Sabreur, as he had been nicknamed, à la Murat, was soft as silk in the hands of a beauty, and impressionable as wax when fairy fingers were at work. He had never in his life resisted a woman, and avowed himself utterly unable to do so. Have you ever known the science that brought Laomedon to grief of any avail against the Lydian Queen ?

“Letters ! Why *will* they write them ?” he said, as he glanced at the small heap of feminine correspondence piled beside his plate. “It’s such a pity ! —it only makes us feel bearish, bored, and miserably ungrateful ; wastes an hour to get through them religiously, or hangs a millstone of unperformed duty and unexpiated debt about our necks for the livelong day, till post-time comes round again and makes bad worse !”

“Why *will* they write them ?” echoed Strathmore, giving a contemptuous push of his elbow to Nina Montolieu’s envelope, a souvenir of the past season, with which he could very well have dispensed. “Our Brinvilliers poison us with patchouli paper, and stab us with a crowquill. One might like to ‘die of a rose

in aromatic pain,' but I would rather not die of three scented sheets crossed ! Correspondence is cruel—with women. If you *don't* answer them, you feel sinful and discourteous ; if you *do* answer them, you only supply them with ammunition to fire on to you afresh with fifty more rounds of grape and canister. They love to spend their whole mornings skimming over a thousand lines, and winding up with 'Toujours à toi !' They love to write honey to you with one pen, and gall about you with another ; they love to address their dearest friends on a rose-tinted sheet, and fold it to damn them on a cream-coloured one. Writing is women's *métier* ; but it is deucedly hard that they will inflict the results upon us !'

"It's an odd psychological fact that women will write on for a twelvemonth unanswered, as religiously as they wipe their pens, omit their dates, and believe in the acceleration of postal speed by an 'Immediate' on the envelope," put in Phil Danvers from the bottom of the table, helping himself to some Strasbourg pâté. "Some of them write delightfully, though—Tricksey Bellevoix does. Her notes are the most delicious olla podrida of news, mots, historiettes, and little tit-bits of confidence imaginable ; she always tells you, too, mischievous things of the people you don't like, instead of scandalising people you do, after the ordinary fashion. Her letters are not bad fun at all when you're smoking, and want something to look at for ten minutes."

"I'll tell her how you rate them ! She's going to

Charlemont next week. See if you get any more letters, Phil!" cried Erroll.

"My dear fellow, if we turned king's evidence on one another, I don't think we should get any more feminine favours at all!" laughed Strathmore. "Very few of them would relish the chit-chat about them if they'd correct reports from the club windows and short-hand notes from the smoking-rooms. Would you be let in again to the violet boudoir in Bruton-street if Lady Fitz knew you'd told me last night that she had the very devil's own temper? and would Dan be called '*ami choisi de mon cœur*,' if Madame la Baronne knew that when he gets her notes he says, 'Deuce take the woman!—how she bothers,' audibly in White's? Try that grilse, Langton—it was in the river yesterday."

"And is prime. It would have been worth Georgie's trolling."

"Georgie lost all her rings last week in the Dee—two thousand pounds' worth in diamonds and sapphires—serve her perfectly right! What business has she with March browns and dun governors?" said the host of White Ladies, drawing a plate of peaches to him. "I cannot conceive what women are about when they take up that line of thing. How can they imagine an ill-done replica of ourselves *can* attract us! A fast woman is an anomaly, and all anomalies are jarring and bizarre. To kiss lips that smell of smoke—to hear one's belle amie welcome one with 'All serene!—to see her 'bugle eyeball and her cheek of

cream' only sparkle and flush for a tan gallop and a Rawcliffe yearling—to have her boudoir as horsy as the Corner, and her walk a cross between a swing and a strut ! Pah ! give me women as soft, and as delicate, and as velvet as my peaches !”

“Peaches ?” put in Erroll. “Ominous simile ! Your soft women will have an uncommonly hard stone at their core, and a kernel that's poison under the velvet skin, mon cher Cis !”

“*Soit !* I only brush the bloom, and taste the sweetness !” yawned Strathmore. “A wise man never lingers long enough over the same to have time to come to the core. With peaches and women, it's only the side next the sun that's tempting ; if you find acid in either, leave them for the downy blush of another ! How poetic we grow ! Is it the Rheinish ? That rich, old, amber, mellow wine always has a flavour of Hoffmann's fancies and Jean Paul's verse about it ; it smells of the Rheingau ! I don't wonder Schiller took his inspirations from it. I say, Erroll, I heard from Rokeby this morning. He doesn't say a word about the Sartory betting, nor yet of the White Duchess scandal. He is only full of two things : La Pucelle's chances of the Prix de Rastatt at Baden, and of this beauty he's raving of, something superb, according to him, a Creole, I think he says—Lady Vavasour ! Really one's bored to death with ecstasies about that woman ! Have you heard the name ? I have lots of times, but I've always missed her.”

"Vavasour? Vavasour? The deuce, I have—rather!" said Erroll, thrown into a beatific vision by the mere name of the lady under discussion, while he stirred some more cream into his chocolate.

"Who was she?" asked Langton, of the 16th Lancers, who was only just back from service in Bengal.

"More than I can tell you, my boy. I believe it's more than anybody knows. She sprang into society like Aphrodite from the sea-foam. One may as well be graceful in metaphor, eh? You mean a Creole, Strathmore, made a tremendous row at St. Petersburg—came nobody knew precisely whence—hadn't been seen till she appeared as Lady Vavasour and Vaux tooling a six-in-hand pony-trap, with pages of honour in lapis-lazuli liveries, that created a furore in Longchamps, and made the Pré Catalan crowded to get a glimpse of her. Ever since then all Europe's been at her feet!"

"That's the woman!" broke in Danvers. "Oh, she's divine, they say. Everybody goes mad after her, and can't help himself. Scrope Waverley raved of her; he saw her at Biarritz, and swears she's quite matchless. She's the most capricious coquette, too, that ever broke hearts with a fan-handle!"

"Hearts! Faugh!" sneered Strathmore; and, when he did so, his face was very cold—a coldness strangely at variance with the swift, dark passions that slumbered in his eyes. "My good fellow, don't give us a réchauffé of Scrope Waverley's sentimental

nonsense ! The man must be weaker than the fan-handle if he be ruled by it.”

Erroll lifted his eyebrows, and sighed :

“ May be ! But the little ivory sticks play the deuce with us when they’re well managed.”

“ Speak for yourself ! Don’t make your confessions in the plural, that their folly may sound general, pray !”

“ Oh, *you*—you’re a confounded cold fellow ! Wear chained armour, wrap yourself in asbestos, and all that sort of thing, ‘ larva kisses’ wouldn’t melt you, and Helen wouldn’t move you unless you chose !”

Strathmore laughed a little.

“ Why should they ? It is only fools who go in fetters. I can *not* comprehend that madness about a woman—to lie at her feet and come at her call, and take her caresses one minute and her neglect the next, as if you were her spaniel, with nothing better to do than to live in her bondage ! It is miserably contemptible ! What is weakness if *that* isn’t one, eh ?”

Erroll flung the envelope with the scarlet chiffre, lying on the table within reach of his hand, at his host and friend, as proof and reproof of the nullity of his doctrines.

“ Most noble lord ! you have the cheek to talk coldly and disdainfully like that, while you know you are in the net of the Montolieu, and Heaven knows how many others besides !”

Strathmore laughed again as the envelope fluttered

down on the ground, falling short of him where he lay back in his fauteuil :

“ *Bécasse!* that is a very different affair. Nina is a dashing little lawless lady, and knows how to pillage with both hands ; one must pay if one dallies with the Free Companions. You don’t suppose she ever held me in her bondage, or flattered herself she did for an hour, do you ? No one was ever *in love* with that sort of women after twenty ; one *makes* love to them in parenthesis as it were, of course, but that’s quite another thing. It is how you lose your hearts, how you hang on a smile, how you let yourselves be marked and hit and brought down like the silliest noddy-bird that ever sat to be shot at, how you go mad after *one* woman, and that one woman with, nine times out of ten, nothing worth worshipping about her—it is that which I can’t understand.”

“ Thank your stars ! ” said Erroll, softly, and with a profound sigh of envy. “ Go about with your *noli me tangere* shield, and be piously thankful you’ve got it then. Only the ‘ haughty in their strength,’ *et cætera*, you know—what’s the rest of the scriptural warning ?—unbelievers *do* come to grief sometimes for their hardened heterodoxy ! This superb Vavasour, I want dreadfully to see her. They say she is the best thing we have had for a long time, since the Duchesse d’Ivore was in her first prime.”

“ She must be the same I heard so much about in Paris last winter ; she was passing the season in Rome, so I missed seeing her. She has the most

wayward caprices, they say, of any living woman," said Danvers, turning over the leaves of the morning papers; "but the *caprices d'une belle femme* are always bewitching and always permissible. A great beauty has no sins; she may do what she likes, and we forgive her, even with the leopard claws in our skin. The pretty panther! it looks so handsome and so soft; its very crimes are only mischief."

" You haven't been in Scinde, Phil," said Langton, with the grim smile of a campaigner who hears those who have never suffered jest at scars; while their host, rather tired of this breakfast-chat about women, turned to his unopened correspondence, till his guests, having thrown their letters away, to be answered at any distant and hazardous future, having yawned over the papers, casually remarking that that poor devil Allington's divorce case was put off till next session, or that there was an awful row in South Mexico, rose by general consent, and began to think of the rabbits.

White Ladies was one of the pleasantest places to visit at in England. A long beadroll might have been cited of houses that eclipsed it in every point, but the Abbey had a charm, as it had a beauty, of its own. In the deep recesses of its vast forest-lands there were drives of deer that gave more royals in one day's sport than were ever found south of the Cheviots. In the dark pools, some of them well-nigh inaccessible, where they lay between gorse-covered hills or down in wooded valleys, the wild fowl flocked

by legions. The river, that ran in and out, of which you just caught glimpses from the west windows, flashing between the boughs in the distance, was famed for its salmon, and had in olden days given char and trout to the tables of the monastery, whose celebrity had reached to royal Windsor and princely Sheen, and made the Tudor covetous for the land and water that yielded such good fare. Sport was to be had in perfection among the brakes and woods at White Ladies ; and within, even in the very bachelor dens overlooking the cloisters, there were luxury and comfort ; while fair women used to come down to White Ladies, sufficiently lovely to rouse the sleeping Dominicans from their graves, as they swept through the aisles of the chapel ; and laughter would ring out from the smoking-room, when the men had their feet in the papooshes and their pipes in their mouths, loud enough to wake all the echoes of the abbey, and make the dead monks, lying under the sward, turn in their tombs and cross themselves, at the profanity of their successors and supplacers.

White Ladies was a grand old place, and Strathmore was envied by most of his friends and acquaintance for its possession. It had come to him by the distaff side, from his mother's father, who, failing heirs male in the direct line, had left it to him on condition that he assumed his name. Strathmore bore a close resemblance to his mother's family, whose name he had taken ; he had nothing either in feature or in character in common with the easy,

inert, sensual, placable, Saxon Castlemeres, with their Teuton good humour and their Teuton phlegm, but he inherited in every point the type of the Strathmores, that courtly, silent, Norman race, swift and fierce in passion, dark and implacable in hate, keen to avenge, slow to forgive, imperious in love, and cold in hate; and with the features might go the character.

Others do not know, we do not know ourselves, all that lies latent in us, until the seeds of good or evil that are hidden and unknown, germinate to deed and blossom into action, and make us reap for weal or woe the harvest we have sown. If with the countenance, he inherited the character, of those who had ruled before him at White Ladies, there had been little in his life to develop the unroused nature. The darker traits might have died out with the darker times, as the mailed surcoat of steel had been replaced by a velvet morning coat, as the iron portcullis had been put away by a gold-fringed portière, as the culverin above the gateway had been removed for the soft, silken folds of a flag. Lions long kept in a tame life lose their desert instinct and their thirst for blood, so the Strathmores in long centuries of court life might have outworn and lost what had been evil and dangerous in them in the days of Plantagenet, of Lancaster, and of York. Or, if the nature were not dead, but only sleeping, there was nothing to arouse it; things went smoothly and well with Strathmore;

he had birth, fortune, talents of a high order ; he was courted by women, partly because he was very cold to them, chiefly, doubtless, because he was younger son of the Marquis of Castlemere and master of White Ladies. In a diplomatic career he had a wide field for the ambitions that attracted him—the ambition not of place, wealth, or title, but of Power, the deep, subtle state power that had in all ages fascinated the Strathmores, and been wielded by them successfully and skilfully. Life lay clear, brilliant, unruffled behind him and before him. If there ran in his blood the old spirit of the Strathmores, that had often worked their own doom and been their own scourge, that gleamed from their eyes in the old portraits by Antonio More, and Jameson, and Vandyke, hanging in the vaulted picture-gallery at the Abbey, and that made those who looked on them understand how those courtly, elegant, suave gentlemen had been swift to steel, and pitiless in pursuit, and imperious in ire,—if this spirit still ran in his blood it was dormant, and had never been wakened to its strength. Opportunity is the forcing-house that gives birth to all things ; without it, seeds will never ripen into fruit ; with it, much that might otherwise have died out innocuous expands to baneful force. Man works half his own doom, and circumstance works the other half. Yet, because we have not been tempted, we therefore believe we can stand ; because we have not yet been brought nigh the furnace, we therefore hold

ourselves to be fire-proof ! Mes frères, the best of us are fools, I fear ! The steel is not proven till it has passed through the flames.

Sooner or later—though they may lie to it long, half a lifetime, perhaps—I believe that men and women are all true to their physiognomies ; that they prove, sooner or later, that the index Nature has writ (though written in crabbed, uncertain characters which few can read altogether aright) upon their features is not a wrong nor a false one. Men lie, but Nature does not. They dissemble, but she speaks out. They conceal, but she tells the truth. What is carved on the features, will develop, some time or other, in the career. When Bernini made the prophecy that foretold ill for the heir of England, could any prediction seem more absurd ? Yet Charles Stuart wrought his own fate, and the fruit of the past, whose seed had been sown by his own hands, was bitter between his teeth when the foretold calamity fell, black and ghastly, betwixt the People and the Throne. Strathmore's life, cold, clear, cloudless as the air of a glittering, still, winter's noon, was utterly at variance with his physiognomy—the physiognomy which had the eyes of a Catiline and the face of a Strafford ! Yet, as time went on, and he passed of his own will into a path which a man stronger in one sense, and weaker in another, would have never entered, the spirit that was latent in him awoke, and wrought his own fate and wove his own scourge more darkly and more erringly, because more consciously and more resolutely, than Charles Stuart ;

making him eat of the fruit of his own sowing to the full as bitterly as he of England, who might never have bowed his head to the axe that chill January morning, when a king fell, amidst the silence of an assembled multitude, if the first obstinate error which had seemed sweet to him had been put aside, and the first wilful turn out of the right path been avoided : the turn—so slight !—that led on to the headsman and the scaffold !

CHAPTER II.

UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE ELMS.

THE rabbits were tame in comparison with the drives for which the forests of White Ladies were famed, and with the bouquets of pheasants that the battues afforded later on in the year; still they were better than nothing, and were peppered *faute de mieux* that day. But the chief thing done by the whole quartette, was to lie under the trees and drink the iced champagne-cup and Badminton, brought there, with a cold luncheon, on an Exmoor pony by the under-keepers about two o'clock; which was, however, as pleasant occupation for idleness on a sultry summer's day as anything that could be suggested, while the smoke curled up through the leafy roofing above head, and the dogs lay about on the moss with their tongues out, hot, tired, and excited, and the mavises and black-birds sang in the boughs.

"Where the deuce is the Sabreur?" asked Phil

Danvers, when the rabbits had been slain by the score, and the chimes of the Abbey, ringing seven o'clock with the slow, musical chant of the "Adeste Fideles," came over the woods, and warned them that the dressing-bell must be going, and that it was time to think about dinner.

"By George! I don't know," said Strathmore. "I haven't seen him for the last hour. Didn't he say something about the Euston Coppice? I dare say he is gone there after the rabbits; we must have missed him somewhere."

"It's easy to lose oneself in these woods of yours, Strathmore," said Langton, striking a fresh fusee. "The timber's so tremendously thick, and there are no paths to speak of; you never have the wood cut down, do you?"

"Cut down! Certainly not! My good fellow, do you think the woods of White Ladies go for building purposes? I wonder Bertie is gone off like that. Pritchard, have you seen Major Erroll?"

"I see the Major a going toward the coppice, my lord, about an hour ago, when we was beating of the Near Acre—a going down that ere path, my lord," responded Pritchard, the under-keeper.

"Queer fellow!" said Strathmore, as he gave his gun to one of the boys, and lighted a weed. "What did he go off for, I wonder? He must have missed us, somehow."

"Perhaps he's taken a wrong cut, and will wander miserably till the soup's cold and the fish overdone,"

suggested Danvers. "Lady Millicent is coming to-night, ain't she, with the Harewood people? He'll hang himself if he isn't in in time to take her in to dinner; he swears by her just now, you know. The Sabreur's eternally in love! Who isn't, though?"

"I'm not," said Strathmore, with perfect veracity. It was somewhat his pride that he had never lost his head for any woman in his life.

"Because you're panoplied with protocols, and sworn to the State! You're a cursed cold fellow, Cis—always were!" interrupted Danvers, with a mixture of impatience and envy. "Bertie *has* lost himself, I bet you. I was benighted once, don't you remember? If he miss Lady Millicent, he'll hang himself, to a certainty! We must ask her for one of her rose ribbons to made the suicide effective!"

"I'll go round by the coppice home, and look for him," said Strathmore. "There are two hours before the people come. I shall be back in plenty of time. Au revoir!—you and Phil want longer for your toilettes than I do, because you'll dress for the Harewood women!"

It was a splendid evening—clear, sultry, with an amber light falling through the aisles of the trees, and long shadows deepening across the sward, while the wild fowl went to roost beside the pools, and the herons dipped their beaks into the dark cool waters that lay deep and still, with broad-leaved lilies and tangled river plants floating languidly on their surface. Strathmore left his guests to take the shorter cut that

led direct to the side-door of the bachelors' wing, and strolled himself through Euston Coppice, a wild, solitary, intricate bit of the park, that had more of the luxuriant forest-growth of parts of Lower Brittany than of the tamer, more cultivated look of English woodlands. Some volcanic convulsion long ages ago had rent and split the earth in this part into a fantastic surface, the gaps so filled up by furze, hazel, and yellow heath, and the rugged sides so covered that the right track might very easily be lost. He walked onward, looking about him ; for he thought it possible that Erroll might have missed the right path, and that he might fall in with him as he passed home-wards.

Bertie was the solitary person whom Strathmore could ever have been said to have loved. His attachment was very difficult to rouse ; in the world, people, specially pretty coquettes, called him without any heart, perhaps without any feeling. It was true that he had never lost his head after any of them ; his indifference was no affectation, and his vaunted panoply no pretence ; the Strathmores had always better liked state plot and subtle power than the women whose odorous tresses had swept over their Milan corslets, and whose golden heads had been pillow'd on their breasts. To Erroll, Strathmore bore, however, a much deeper attachment than beauty had ever won from him—the attachment of a nature that gives both love and friendship very rarely ; but when it gives either gives instantly, blindly, and trustingly ; the nature that had always

been characteristic of the “ swift, silent, Strathmores,” as the alliteration of cradle chronicles and provincial legends nicknamed the race which had reigned at White Ladies since Hastings. The friendship between them was the friendship closer than brotherhood of dead Greece and old Judæa—the bright truthfulness, the soft laziness, the candour, the dash, the verve, the hundred attractive, attachable qualities of Erroll’s character, endeared him to Strathmore by that strange force of contrast which has so odd a spell sometimes in friendship as in love ; and the bond between them was as close and firmly riven as a clasp of steel. They never spoke of their friendship ; it was not the way of either of them ; it is only your loving ladies who lavish eternal vows, and press soft kisses on each other’s cheeks, and swear they cannot live apart over their pre-prandial Souchong, to—slander each other suavely behind their fans an hour afterwards, and sigh away their bosom-darling’s reputation with a whisper ! They rarely spoke of it ; but they had a friendship for one another passing the love of women, and they relied on it as men rely on their own honour, as silently and as securely.

Once, when they were together in Scinde, having both gone thither on a hunting trip to the big-game districts for a change one autumn, to bring home panther-skins and try pig-sticking, a tigress sprang out on them as they strolled alone through the jungle—sprang out to alight, with grip and

fang, upon Strathmore, who neither heard nor saw her, as it chanced. But before she could be upon her victim, Erroll threw himself before him, and catching the beast by her throat as she rose in the air to her leap, held her off at arm's length, and fell with her, holding her down by main force, while she tore and gored him in the struggle—a struggle that lasted till Strathmore had time to take aim, and send a ball through her brain ; a long time, let me tell you, though but a few short seconds in actual duration, to hold down, and to wrestle in the grip of a tigress of Scinde. “ You would have done the same for me, my dear old fellow,” said Erroll, quietly and lazily, as his eyes closed, and he fainted away from the loss of blood. And that was all he would ever vouchsafe to say or hear said about the matter. He had risked his life to save Strathmore’s ; he knew Strathmore would have acted precisely so for him. It was a type of the quality and of the character of their friendship.

The evening shadows were slanting across the sward, while the squirrels ran from branch to branch, and the chesnuts lying on the mass turned to gold in the western sun, as Strathmore walked along with a couple of beagles following in his track. See Erroll he did not, and he wondered where the deuce he had gone ; if he had been absolutely after the rabbits he would have taken some of the men, or the dogs at the least, with him ; and it was odd he had chosen that night in especial to be belated, as among the people

coming to dine at White Ladies in an hour's time was Lady Millicent Clinton, a beautiful blonde, tantalising, imperious, and bewitching to the highest degree, whom Erroll had watched for at Flirtation Corner, left the coulisses for at the opera, bought guinea cups of tea for at bazaars, and dedicated himself to generally, throughout the past season. He walked onwards, flushing the pheasants with his step, and startling the herons as he passed the pools, till they rose at the bark of the dogs, and sailed majestically away in the sunny silent air. At last, as he went along the confines of the deer-park, towards the entrance of a long elm-walk, half lane, half avenue, that led round towards the Abbey, he saw, leaning over a gate against which his gun was resting, and talking to a woman, Bertie—in quest of other game than the rabbits.

He was at some distance, almost at the other end of the avenue; across which broad lines of yellow light fell through the trunks of the trees, while the elm-boughs meeting above head, thick with luxuriant leaf, threw chequered shadows on the turf below. He was standing by the stile which led into a bridle-path that wound up to the church a mile or so beyond, and was talking earnestly to his companion, who stood on the other side, and who, even at that distance, made a charming picture ; much such a one as Aline, when Boufflers toyed with her at the woodland brook under the forests of Lorraine, with the butterflies fluttering

above her head, and the wild flowers hanging in her childish hands. She stood on the lower step of the stile, so that as she reached upwards one of her arms was wound about his neck, her face, soft, youthful, and fair, was lifted to his own, as his hand lingered on her brow, pushing back from it the shining waves of hair, while she nestled closely to him as a bird to the one who caresses it, as a spaniel to the master it follows ! It was a scene to be interpreted at a glance, that golden sunset hour under the shadow of the elms ;—and *in* those hours who remembers that the sun will set, leaving the dank dews of night to brood where its beams have fallen ; that the foliage above us will drop off sere and withered like the “dark brown years” of Ossian, into which we must enter and dwell ; that in the grasses the asp is curling, that in the west the clouds are brooding ? None remember, mes amis ! neither did those who lingered then beneath the elms before the sun went down.

“ *That’s* his game ! By George ! I thought it was odd if the rabbits alone made him too late for dinner ! I wonder how many he has shot in the coppice. Poor Lady Millicent ! she would die of mortification and pique,” thought Strathmore, as he looked up the elm-walk at its crossed light and shade, with a smile in which there was a dash of contempt. He had been loved by women who might well have claimed to haunt his memory ; proud, peerless beauties, who might well have looked to rouse the swift imperious

passion which, *when* they loved—that unloving race! —the love of the Strathmores had ever been; but he had cared for none of them, and this wasting of hours, this ceaseless adoration of women, this worshipping of a mistress's eyebrow, was incomprehensible and somewhat contemptible in his sight. He never was so nearly losing patience with Erroll as when he came in evidence with the perpetual gallantries, the never-ending, ever-changing *grandes passions*, as easily lit as cigars and as quickly thrown aside, that were characteristic of the Sabreur, and his best beloved pursuit. Strathmore would as soon have understood consuming his time in constantly blowing soap-bubbles!—he looked now with a certain disdainful amusement at them where they stood; then, unseen himself, he turned, and making the dogs quiet with a sign, crossed the avenue, and went along beside the sunken fence of the deer-park by another route homeward, so that he should neither spy upon nor interrupt them.

Such game was Erroll's especial sport, if he found it on the lands of White Ladies he was fully welcome to the preserves undisputed. Strathmore did not envy him either the small amusement of slaying, or the inevitable trouble of the game when slain! A quarter of an hour later on, as he crossed the lawns that lay in front of the Abbey, while the chimes of the bells were still ringing the curfew with low mellow chants and carillons, he heard a step behind

him, and as he turned faced the Sabreur, who came along smoking, blandly unconscious that he had been seen in his tête-à-tête under the elms.

"Had good sport in the coppice, mon cher? What did you mean by giving us the slip like this?" said Strathmore, as he swung round and waited for him.

"Pretty good; rabbits were rather shy," answered Erroll, with the meerschaum between his lips, and the most tranquil air of innocence that the human countenance ever wore.

"But *la belle wasn't!*—you seemed very good friends; is she an old acquaintance or a new? Is the game in the bag or only marked; hit or only just flushed? I expect the whole story in the smoking-room to-night!"

A certain dash of annoyance and discomfiture went over Erroll's face for the moment, but he laughed:

"Hang you! where did you see me?"

"Where you were very plainly to be seen! If you make open-air rendezvous, Bertie, you must be prepared for spectators. Who is she? If the game's been found on my lands, I think it is fair I should have an account of it. Is she an old love or a new?"

"Not new," laughed the Sabreur, pulling his Glen-garry over his forehead, to keep the sunset glare out of his eyes.

"*Not* new! I thought you gave no more thought to old loves than to old gloves—the gloss off both,

both go to the devil! I suppose you found her up last autumn, when you were down here in my place? I was in the East, so I am not responsible for what happened! You might have told me, my dear fellow; *I* shouldn't have rivalled you; pretty peasants never had any attraction for me; I like the *tourneure* of the world, not the odour of the dairy. Give me grace and wit, not rosy cheeks and fingers fresh from the churn and the hencoop; the perfume of frangipane, not of the farm-yard. Petrarch might adore a miller's wife—it is not my line—and *I* think the flour must have made Laura's '*chiome d'oro*' look dusty: I never took a mistress from my tenantry! Who is she, Erroll?"

Erroll sent a puff of smoke into the air, and turned to Strathmore with his gay insouciant laugh, clear as a bell and sweet as a girl's, that had so much *youth* in it:

"I'll tell you some other time. Old story, you know, nothing new in it. We're all fools about women, and she beats any of those we shall have to-night hollow, Lady Millicent and all of 'em!"

Strathmore raised his eyebrows:

"An *old* love! and you're as enthusiastic as that? What must you have been in the beginning! Thank Heaven I was not here. Poor Lady Millicent! sal volatile by the gallon would never restore her if she knew a young provincial, smelling of the hayfield, with a set of cherry ribbons for a Sunday, and a week-day aroma of the cowshed (if not the pigsty), was

said by the difficle Sabreur to beat her hollow!—and she a Court beauty and a Lady in Waiting! So much for taste!"

"Pigsty? Cowshed? You didn't see her just now, Cecil; you couldn't!" broke in Bertie, disgusted.

"I saw a woman, my dear Erroll; she was your property, and I noticed no more."

"For God's sake don't suppose me such a Goth that I should fall in love with a dairymaid, Strath!" said Erroll, plaintively. "She's nothing of that sort —nothing, I give you my honour! Let me clear my character, pray. *Should* I love a 'Phillis in a hazel-bower?' I hate cobwebs, dew, and earwigs; and I can't bear a coarse colour for a woman! I say, don't let out anything about it, though, will you? Don't tell the other fellows; there's no object, and they'd only—"

"Chaff you? Exactly!"

"No! I don't care a straw for chaff," said Erroll, meditatively. "It's only boys who mind chaff, *we* don't. But they might get hunting her out, you see —would, I dare say, *I* should in their place—and I don't want that. I wish to keep the thing quiet. I have managed to do it hitherto; and she would cut up as rough at insult as Lady Millicent herself; you understand?"

"Not very clearly; but it doesn't matter; one doesn't look for perspicuity in love intrigues—nor for reason."

"Hang you ! you know what I mean," murmured the Sabreur, lazily.

"You mean, you don't want me to tell of your tête-à-tête, and set the men on to badger you about it when the women are gone ? Very well ! I'm silent as the dead !" laughed Strathmore. "What a wicked dog you are, Bertie, on my word, though. Country air ought to purify your morals ; one naturally sins in cities, but——"

"Inevitably sins in villages ! Just so, one's nothing else to do ! In town, one sins from sociability ; in the country, from solitariness—a safe indication that the soft sins are the natural concomitants of one's existence everywhere, and shouldn't be resisted !"

"Admirable theory !—developed in practice, too, by its preacher, which can't be said of all precepts. Arcadia and the Rue Bréda have more in common than one generally fancied then ; but I shouldn't have thought *you'd* have taken to provincial amourettes, Sabreur ! However, failing hot-house fruits, I suppose you take a turn at blackberries ? What an odd state of existence it must be, not to be able to live twenty-four hours without finding some woman's eyes to look into !"

"Very natural, I think !—when women's eyes are the pleasantest mirrors there are, and framed on purpose for us. You were never in love in your life, Strath."

"I was never the fool of a woman, if you mean that."

“ You’ve brought over a prima donna, because, in a cold sort of way, you thought her a handsome Roman,” went on Erroll, disdaining the interruption —“ or you’ve taken up the Montolieu, because she made a dead set at you ; and because one has a Montolieu as naturally as one has a cigar-case or a pair of slippers—or you’ve made love to some grande dame because it answered a political purpose, and advanced a finesse to be in her boudoir when everybody else was shut out of it ; but as for *love*—you know nothing about it !”

Strathmore laughed :

“ I know as much as any wise man knows. I know just as much as flavours life—any more disturbs it. I like a woman for her beauty, but I should be particularly sorry to sup in raptures off a single smile, to tie my hands with a golden hair, and to go mad after the shape of an ankle, as you do with a dozen divinities in as many months. A week or two ago you were wild about the Clinton, who *is* worth looking at, I grant you, and now, I dare say, you’ve lost your head just as completely for little Phillis yonder, with her hands in the butter ! My dear Bertie, it’s positively inexplicable to me ; I can fancy your kissing the lips, if they’re pretty ones, of all those goddesses, but I can’t possibly understand your caring about the goddesses themselves !”

“ Hold your tongue !—and, for Heaven’s sake, don’t suppose I’m in love with a human churn ! Hands in

the butter; what an idea!" murmured the Sabreur, disgusted.

"Well! it must be a cabbage-rose this time, conservatory ones don't grow about the home farms. Or if it isn't——"

Strathmore stopped, struck with a sudden thought, and swung round, as they walked under the cloisters, his face as he turned to Erroll softening with that smile which took from it all that was cold, dark, and dangerous in its physiognomy, and gave to it an almost tender warmth—a warmth that as yet no woman had had the magic to waken there. He laid his hand on Erroll's shoulder with the old familiar gesture of their Eton days, as they came out of the aisles of the cloisters on to the lawn that stretched smooth and sunny before an antique grey terrace, with broad flights of steps hung with ivy, looking down on to thick avenues and long glades of trees, like the terrace at Haddon, where Dorothy Vernon fled in the summer moonlight to the love of John Manners.

"Erroll, I say, it is no entanglement, no annoyance, is it, this affair of yours?"

Erroll threw his cigar away, shook his head, and laughed:

"Not in the least; except—that my conscience smites me a little for it sometimes. That's all!"

Strathmore's hand rested still on his shoulder, lying there in the safe, cordial grasp of a friendship warm as the friendship of David for Jonathan.

"*Conscience!* How exceptional you are! The word's out of all modern dictionaries, and *rococo* from use. But what I meant was, if you had any difficulty of any kind—if you need to shake yourself free from any embarrassments—you would keep to your promise and let me serve you in all ways? Remember, old fellow, you gave me your word?"

He meant that Erroll would let him assist him more substantially than by advice. The Sabreur was a man about town, with little more to float him than a good name and a fashionable reputation, lucky Baden "coups" and dashed-off magazine articles; his debts were heavy sometimes, his embarrassments not a few, though on his gay sunny nature they never weighed long; he was, very literally, a "beggared gentleman," though his beggary was as joyous and insouciant a Bohemianism as might be; and Strathmore, who was generous to an extreme, and ascetically indifferent to riches, had always pressed him, and sometimes, though generally with the utmost difficulty, compelled him to accept his aid; without bond or payment.

His hand lay on Erroll's shoulder where they stood at the foot of the terrace steps, and the light from the west fell full upon his face as Strathmore looked at him—it was so frank, so glad, with a smile as bright as a girl's upon it, that many years afterwards Strathmore saw it in memory fresh as though beheld but yesterday.

“Dear old fellow! I know you would! If I needed, I would ask you as freely as though you were my brother;” and Erroll’s voice was rich and full as he spoke, like the voice of a woman when she speaks of, or to, that which she loves: then he laughed with the gay carelessness of his temper. “But there’s no need here; I’m not the sufferer. They are not panther griffes, like your Montolieu’s or La Julia’s, confound her! I play the tiger part if there be one in the duo. I say, Strathmore, what a confounded bore your going off to Servia—Bosnia, Bulgaria, where is it? Won’t Prince Michel wait?”

“Prince Michel would willingly wait till doomsday rather than see *me*, but the F. O. won’t. It is a bore; I didn’t want to leave till over the First; however, *diplomatie oblige!* and there’ll be a good deal of finesse wanted. It is an errand quite to my taste.”

“Perhaps you’ll see this adorable Vavasour and Vaux beauty on the Continent. Do try!”

“And report her to you, as game worth your coming over to mark or not, as the case may be? You *paysanne* won’t hold her ground long against the Peeress, if she’s only a tithe of what Rokeby says. I will make note for you accurately if I see her; and I may come back through Paris in the spring. The deuce! it’s getting very late. Those people will all be here before we are dressed for dinner,” said Strathmore, as he crossed the terrace, entered the house, and went up to his dressing-room that looked out across the pleasaunce and the deer-park that lay beyond.

Lady Millicent came, haughty, lovely, and bewitching, with the Harewood people and several others, to dinner that night at White Ladies, in the great dining-hall that had been the refectory of the old Dominicans. Where travel-worn pilgrims and serge-clothed palmers, footsore and bronzed by Eastern suns, had sat and supped, telling of miracles of Loretto or persecutions from the Moslem to the listening brethren, pretty women with diamonds glancing in their hair, and smiles brightening in their languid, lustrous eyes, sat at the table, covered with gold plate, and Bohemian glass and delicate Sèvres, with rich fruits and brilliant exotics, and Parian figures holding up baskets odorous with summer blossom, while the wines sparkled pink and golden in their carafes, and flushed to warm, ruby tints in the silver claret-jugs. Where the white robes of the Dominicans had swept, the perfumed laces and silks of their trailing dresses as noiselessly moved ; where the Latin chant of the Salutaris Hostia had risen and swelled, the low laugh of their musical voices echoed ; where the incense had floated in purple clouds, the bouquet of Burgundies and the perfume of Millefleurs scented the air ; where the silent monks had sat and broken black bread in the monarchical gloom of their woodland Abbey, Lady Millicent and her sisters flirted and smiled, and brushed the bloom off a hothouse grape, and trifled with the wing of an ortolan, while the light flashed azure-bright in their sapphires, and the opals gleamed in their bosom. *Le Roi est mort.*

Vive le Roi ! So To-day succeeds to Yesterday, and the dead are supplanted and the past is forgot ! Where the viaticum last night was administered to the dying, the laugh of the living echoes gaily this morning, and in its turn the laugh will die off the air, and the chant of the tomb will come round again. Such is life and such is death, and the two are ever fused together and twisted in one inseparable cord, the white line running with the black, side by side, crossed and recrossed, following each other as the night the day !

" You incorrigible fellow, what would your wood-nymph have said to you if she'd seen you making such desperate love to Lady Millicent to-night ? " said Strathmore, as he and Erroll passed down the corridor to the smoking-room, as the last roll of the carriages echoed down the avenue.

" The deuce ! " laughed Erroll. " If they had a lorgnon long enough to let them see any of us when we're away from them, the tamest Griseldis would have little to say to us when we went back to her ! Those poor women ! they're shockingly cheated."

" They have their revenge, mon cher. If we're their first instructors in mischief, they take to the lesson very kindly, and improve on it fast enough ! " laughed Strathmore. " If M. son Mari deceive Lucretia, Lucretia soon turns the tables, and dupes her lord. They are quits with us, and don't want any pity. I wish your luckless wood-nymph had seen you go on with the Clinton to-night ! I am

curious really to know how you get up the steam fresh every time ; now with a duchess, and now with a dairymaid, now with a blonde, and now with a brune ! ”

“ *Afin de varier les couleurs !* ”

quoted Erroll, appropriately, wrapping about him his seed-pearl broidered and sable-lined dressing-gown, dainty and costly enough for Lady Millicent’s wear.

“ *Caramba !* ” broke in Strathmore. “ I have a good mind to punish your inconstancy by betraying your incognita. Such a monopoly of the wild game and the tame birds at once isn’t fair. I’ll tell Danvers the whereabouts of your preserves.”

“ No, no ! Don’t ! there’s a good fellow,” interrupted Erroll, quickly. “ You see—it would only bother one—and— ”

Strathmore laughed as he opened the door of the smoking-room, and the flood of warm light streamed out from within :

“ We don’t like poaching in neglected preserves even ! I understand, my dear fellow. Bag your big game and your small, make love to your Court belle and your country girl both at once, and just as you like ! I won’t set the beaters after either. Have I not said I’ll be silent as death ? *Entrez ! Bah !* there is Phil smoking those wretched musk-scented cigarettes again ; they are only fit for Lady Georgie or Eulalie Papellori. What taste, when there are my Havannahs and cheroots ! ”

CHAPTER III.

THE VIGIL OF ST. JOHN.

IT was the Vigil of St. John in Prague.

The stars were coming out one by one in the clear violet skies, that were still yellow in the west with the beams of a setting sun ; and the dews of the evening were moist upon the thick foliage of the Lorenziberg and the vineyards of the Anlägen, encircling the city with their fresh green zone. The lights, already lit upon the bridges, were mirrored in the waters of the Moldau, or the Veltava, as it is called by its softer Czeschen name, that ran like a broad smooth silver band beneath their arches ; and the glare from the western skies fell on the gilt crosses of the Teyn church, making them blaze and sparkle with fiery brilliance, while the mosque-like spires of a thousand towers stood out clear and delicate as fairy handiwork in the warm golden haze, as the measured chant of litanies, sung by gathered multitudes, rose and fell with slow sonorous rhythm on the hush of the coming

night. For many nights and days before, the hum of collecting people and the weary tramp of tired feet had been heard throughout the city, as devotees of every stock and province had flocked far and near, from wild Silesian forests, from remote Bavarian mountains, from Saxon hamlets buried in their pine-woods, and charcoal-burners' châlets in Moldavian wilds, and Czeschen homesteads nestled in their cherry orchards, to the great Festival of Holy Johannes of Nepomük, at whose most sainted martyrdom, as Legend and Church record, five stars arose and glittered in the waters where the Saint sank, a thousand years ago, and gleamed in golden radiance, heaven-sent witnesses to innocence.

At the Cathedral and in the Platz, before the stars and statue on the bridge, and around the bronze ring in St. Wenzel's Chapel, at every smaller shrine and lesser altar through the city, the dense crowd of pilgrims knelt, all their heads bowed down in prayer, as the numberless ears of wheat in a corn-field bend with one accord before the sweep of a summer breeze. There is something oddly touching, pathetic, majestic, almost sacred in the sight of a surging sea of human life! What is it that is grand and impressive in a dense silent crowd, collected together, no matter whether that crowd be a mass of troops in the Champ de Mars, the gathering of the people upon Epsom Downs, or a countless assembling of peasants in Prague on a Holy day? What is it? Taken individually, the units of each are un-

impressive, grotesque, common-place ; a French chasseur, an English touter, a Sclavonian glass engraver, have no sublimity about them taken singly. But in their aggregate, there is that same strange, nameless, mournful solemnity which brought hot, unbidden tears to the eyes of the man who, while the Magi offered libations to the manes of the Homeric heroes, sat on the white throne at Abydos, looking down on the crowded Hellespont, and the countless thousands that were gathered by the shores of Scamander, beneath the shadow of Mount Ida, while the sunlight glittered on the golden pomegranates of the Immortal Guard, and the gorgeous robes of the Thracians fluttered in the winds. Perhaps with him, we vaguely, unwittingly, involuntarily compassionate these vast multitudes, of which in a century there will not be one who has not been gathered to his tomb ; and the depth of the sadness lends a sanctity to these crowds, whose goal is the grave, which the chill and shallow philosophies of an Artabanus cannot whisper away : for we too are wending thither in their company, we too must turn our steps from golden Abydos, and lay us down to die at Salamis !

It was the Vigil of St. John. Pyramids of gas-jets flared up to the skies, the Five Stars commemorative of the Saint of Nepomük glittered on the parapet in the evening air : there was no sound but the swelling melodious cadence of the Latin litanies, chanted by a million voices in solemn and regular rhythm, filling the night with music, full, rich, mournful as the

glorious harmonies that peal from cathedral choirs at a midnight mass. And an Englishman strolling through the city on foot (for no carriages are permitted in the Platz and Bridge at the Vigil and Festival of St. John), looked down on the kneeling multitudes with a smile on his lips, a smile that had perhaps a little of the sadness of the Persian as he gazed down on the Ægean, and more of natural disdain for these superstitions before him, which were but type of the bigotries of a wider world, where difference from *him* is your neighbour's measure of your difference from Deity, and where we are bidden to accept our creed, as in the time of the Molinistes they were bidden to accept the Pouvoir Prochain, by no better rule than that “*il faut prononcer le mot des lèvres de peur d'être hérétique de nom!*”

As he strolled down Wenzel's Platz, in the centre of which sprang a tree of gas, with a myriad of burning luminous leaves, that threw their glare on the kneeling devotees as they bowed in adoration before the holy shrines, a carriage that had come into the square against all rule—for the best reason, that the horses had broken away, frightened at the music, the lights, the crowds, and had taken their own way thither, beyond their driver's power to pull them in—dashed down the Platz at a headlong gallop. The crowd of pilgrims were too densely packed to have power to move to save themselves by separation or by flight; they fell pêle-mêle one on another, the stronger crushing the weaker, according to custom

in every conflict, calling on Jesus and the Mother of God and Holy Johannes to preserve them from their fate, shrieking, praying, sobbing, swearing; while the horses, maddened by the tumult and the gas glare, tore across the square, dragging their carriage after them like a wicker toy. Nothing less than a heavenly interposition, miraculously great as the Five Stars of Holy Johannes, could save the people in their path from death and destruction; the carriage rocked and swayed, its occupant clasping her hands and crying piteously for help; the horses dashed through the kneeling multitude, knocking down aged men and sobbing children and shrieking women in their headlong course; the oaths and prayers and screams rose loud and shrill, half drowned in the rich sonorous chant of the litanies from priests and pilgrims beyond, that swelled out uninterrupted from every lighted shrine and blazing altar.

Death was imminent for many—death in the hour of prayer, death on the eve of glad festivity;—the horses, snorting, plunging, flinging the white foam from their nostrils, trampled out a merciless path through the close-packed crowd, and trod down beneath their hoofs what they could not scatter from their road. The blaze of gas, the loud swell of the chants, the glitter of the altar lights, the wild tumult and uproar about them, terrified and maddened them. Death was in their van, and in their wake, for all the multitude kneeling there in prayer; but—as they neared the spot where the Englishman was, who had

not moved a yard, and calmly waited their approach, he stood firmly planted, as though made of granite, in their path, and catching them, with a sudden spring, by their ribbons close to the curb, checked them in full flight with a force that sent them back upon their haunches. It needed what he had, an iron strength and perfect coolness ; even with these to aid him it was a dangerous risk to run, for if they shook themselves free, the infuriated beasts would trample him to death.

They reared and plunged wildly, flinging the foam, tinged with blood, over their chests and flanks, and into his eyes, till it blinded him with the spray ; they lifted him three times up off the ground by his wrists with a jerk sufficient to wrench his arms out of their sockets, with a strain enough to make every fibre and muscle break and snap. Still he held on ; they had met their master, and had to give in at last ; they were powerless to shake off his grip ; and, tired out at last with the contest, they stood quiet ; panting, trembling, passive, fairly broken in, their heads drooping, their limbs quivering, blood where the curbs had sawn their mouths, mixed with the snowy foam that covered them from their loins to their pasterns. He let go his hold ; his face was pale, and calm, as though he had lounged out of a ball-room ; but his eyes glittered and gleamed dark with a swift, dangerous passion—a passion that was evil. He stretched his hand up, without speaking, to the coachman for his whip ; the

man stooped down and gave it to him ; and, clearing the crowd wide with a sign, he lashed the horses, pitilessly, fiercely—lashed them till the poor brutes, spiritless, powerless, and trembling, stood shaking like culprits before their judge. That merciless punishing done, his passion had spent itself ; the horses were broken down to the quietness of lambs, and might have been guided by a young child ; letting go his hold on them again, he approached the carriage window, and lifted his hat as carelessly and indifferently as though he were bowing to some acquaintance in the Ride or the Pré Catalan.

“ Madame, you must be very much terrified, but I trust you have not been hurt ? ” he said, in German, to the single occupant of the carriage, who, leaning out, eagerly, and with grateful empressement, stretched to him two delicate, ungloved, jewelled hands.

“ Monsieur ! Mon Dieu ! how brave you have been ! You have saved my life—and at the risk of your own ! What can I say to you ? How can I thank you ? ”

As the glare from the gas-pyramid near and the lights burning on the shrine fell upon her face, he saw that it was one of rare and exceeding loveliness, and smiled slightly as her warm white hands touched his own, that were aching and throbbing with pain :

“ Madame, I am thanked already—*par un regard de vous !* Is there any way in which I can have the honour to assist you ? ”

Before she could reply, the carriage moved. The driver, a rough, ill-mannered Czeč, who wasted no words and no time, started off his trembling horses afresh; he was impatient to be out of the crowd, who, recovering from their terror, were swearing bitterly at him in a hundred guttural dialects, and screaming vociferous indignant wrath; and he was afraid, moreover, of the arrival and the fury of police officials. Without awaiting orders, he started off back again through the square, and the carriage rolled away down the Platz, bearing its occupant out of sight; a broidered handkerchief she had dropped, as her hand met her deliverer's, was the only relic left of her, where it lay on the stones at his feet. The pilgrims, closing over the vacant spot as the vehicle rolled away, crowded round the Englishman who had saved two-thirds of them from imminent death, with impetuous, demonstrative, enthusiastic gratitude, the vivacious Sclavonians calling on the Mother of God and Holy Johannes to bless and reward him, showering down on him a thousand valedictions in harsh Saxon and vehement Czeschen; the women holding up their children to look at him, and remember his face, and pray for him for ever; the terrified peasants kissing his clothes in frantic adoration, canonising him then and there, and calling down upon his head the blessing of the whole heavenly roll of saints and angels; while through the multitude ran a breathless whisper, that their deliverer was none other than

St. John of Nepomük himself, descended on earth in human form to save and champion his faithful people, keeping watch and prayer at his Vigil in Prague !

To be canonised was very far from his taste, and the vehement gratitude lavished upon him was an infinite bore. The vociferous worship of the crowds could very well have been dispensed with, and signing them off to leave him a clear path, he pushed them away, and breaking free from their eager clamour with some difficulty, he walked down the Platz, striking a fusee and lighting a cigar as he went—an act that slightly disturbed the pilgrims who had canonised him, and shook their faith as to his saintship : Holy Johannes would never have smoked !

As he moved from the spot, he saw the handkerchief lying at his feet, and stooped and raised it ; it was of gossamer texture, bordered with delicate lace ; it was subtilely perfumed, and in the corner, broidered with fantastic device, was a coronet and an interlaced chiffre, whose initials were too intricately interwoven for him to be at the pains to decipher them. It was a woman's pretty toy ; some men would have kept it in souvenir of this Vigil of St. John when a face so marvellously lovely had beamed upon them ; he was not one of those ; it was not his way. For a moment he took it up to thrust it in the breast of his waist-coat, more without thought than from any motive in the action ; but as he did so he was passing a pretty Bohemian glass-engraver, whose bright black eyes

sparkled with eager longing as her pretty brunette's face looked out from her yellow hood, and she saw the dainty scented handkerchief in his hand. He threw it to her, dropping the little gossamer toy, with its broidered coronet, into her bosom.

"It will please you better than me, little beauty," he said carelessly, as he went on through the thickly-packed crowd, smoking, and not taking in return the caress she would willingly have allowed; as the pilgrims returned to their prayers, closing over the vacant spot, and the chanted orisons, broken off for a while, rose again in slow-measured harmonies, the litanies ringing out into the silent air, the lights burning on the blazing altars, and the dense crowds bowing down before the shrines throughout the city, while the golden cross of the Teyn church glittered in the light of the stars, and the hushed skies brooded in the twilight of the coming night over the towers and the palaces, the river and the vineyards, the lighted altars, and the frowning fortresses of antique and historic Prague.

CHAPTER IV.

A TITIAN PICTURE SEEN BY SUNSET-LIGHT.

“MOUTON qui rêve, are you thinking of Prague and of me?”

A cumbersome Czeschen boat was dropping down the Moldau, its sails idly flapping in the sultry June night, in which not a breath of wind was stirring, while the mournful music of some of the national lays broke on the air from a little band of musicians playing in the aft of the vessel, wild, sweet, and harmonious, as though they were the melodies of legendary Rubezahl and his Spirit Band. The boat was chiefly filled with peasantry going by water to a fair at Auzig, and bright-eyed glass-engravers, with yellow or scarlet kerchiefs on their black-haired heads, were laughing merrily with each other, and casting mischievous glances at the sailors as they passed them. It was such a summer night as you may see any year in Bohemia; the lazy, silent hour when the

hot, toilsome, blazing day is sinking into the warm, still, tranquil night; when the peasantry leave their field-work, chanting fragments of the Niebelungenlied, or some other Sclavonic song; when the engravers put aside their little graving-wheels, and lean out for a breath of air from their single window under the eaves; when the cattle wind homeward down the hill-side paths, and in the doorways of the Gasthof, under the cherry-trees, the gossipers drink their good-night draughts of Läger and Bayerisches. The orchards, white with blossom, bowered gaily-painted homesteads; the dark red roofs peeped out of châlets half hidden under hollyhocks; the poppy grounds glowed scarlet, catching the last gleam of the setting sun; and over the rye-fields a low western breeze was blowing from the fir-covered hills as the vessel floated down the stream, passing green wooded creeks, and pine-woods growing between the clefts of riven rocks, and golden glimpses of hazy distance from the banks through which the Moldau wound its way.

“Mouton qui rêve, are you thinking of Prague and of me, mon ami?”

The voice was low, and sweet, and rich—that most excellent thing in woman; and the speaker was worthy the voice, where she sat leaning amongst a pile of shawls and cushions with which her servant had covered the rough bench of the boat, as an Odalisque might have leaned amongst the couches of the Odà, with as much Eastern grace and as much

Eastern languor. A *blonde aux yeux noirs*, her eyes were long and dark and lustrous, with a dangerous droop of their thick curling lashes, but her skin was dazzlingly fair, with a delicate bloom in her cheeks ; the hair was not golden, nor auburn, nor blond cendré, but what I have only seen once in my life, the “yellow hair” of the poets, of Edith the Swan-necked, and of Laura of Avignon ; the lips were beautiful—a trifle too full and too sensual, feminine detractors would have objected, but Béranger would have sung of them :

pour ma lèvre qui les presse,
C'est un défaut bien attrayant!

and it was a mouth that surely smiled destruction ! It was a face, brilliant, tender, marvellously lovely like a face of Titian or of Greuze, as she leant among her cushions, with a black veil over her hair, thrown there with the grace of a Spanish mantilla ; and her white hands lying on the rough wooden edge of the vessel, with their rings gleaming in the sunset glare. Her eyes were dwelling on the face of a man who leant over the boat-side within a few yards of her, and who was looking down into the water, a cigar in his mouth, and his profile turned towards her ;—dwelling with curiosity, admiration, satisfaction. A woman appreciated better than a man the peculiar and varied meanings of that physiognomy ; women will not often see widely, but they always see microscopically ; they cannot analyse, but they have invariably rapid intuition.

"It is a face of Vandyke! so much repose, with so much passion. I like it. It tells a story, but a story whose leaves are uncut," she thought to herself, as she leaned forwards, touched his arm with a branch of cherry-blossoms she held, and challenged him with her laughing words, "Mouton qui rêve!"

He turned; he had not seen her there before, though both had been on board some half hour; and as the light blow of the cherry-blossoms struck his arm, scattering their snowy petals, and her low, soft laugh fell on his ear, he recognised the face that he had seen a few days before in the gas glare of the Vigil of St. John, whose broidered handkerchief he had dropped into the bosom of a Bohemian peasant girl, instead of treasuring it in recollection of one so fair. Such a woman would have won courteous welcome and recognition from a Stagyrite or a nonogenarian; and he took the hand she extended to him soft, warm, and small, with sapphires and pearls gleaming on its ungloved fingers, lifting his hat to her with answering words of gratified acknowledgments. He had *not* been thinking of her, but Diogenes himself would not have had courtesy enough to have told her so; and on a summer's evening, dropping down a river in a slow, tedious passage, such a rencontre to while away the time could not choose but be acceptable to any man.

"Ah, monsieur!" she said, softly, as he drew near to her, "how brave you were that night. To dare to stop those horses in full flight!—it was marvellous; it

was heroic ! You saved my life ; how can I ever thank you well enough ?—ever show you half my gratitude ?”

“ Hush, madame, I entreat you !” he said, with a smile, that was rather the calm conventional smile of courtesy than the warmer one she was used to see lighten at her glance. “ You have thanked me abundantly ; if you do more, you will make me ashamed of having served you so little. Few men would not envy me so rich a recompense as lies in having won the smallest title to your gratitude !”

La blonde aux yeux noirs looked up at him searchingly through her silky lashes, and laughed a pretty, mocking, airy laugh.

“ Graceful words ! but are they *meant* ?”

“ Ah, madame !” he answered, laughing, as he seated himself beside the fair stranger, into whose path accident had thrown him so agreeably. “ Perhaps that is a question that it is always wisest never to ask of any words at all !”

“ What an odd man !” thought the lovely Odalisque of the Moldau, letting her eyes rest on the countenance that had for her, as it had for most women, a peculiar fascination, while she laughed again. “ Very true ! Some women will tell you, monsieur, they do not like compliments—never believe them ; it is only that the grapes are sour. *I* like flattery. *I* live on it as children live on bonbons ; if it be not sincere, it is nothing to me, the blame lies on the bad taste of the flatterers. *I* must

have my *dragées*, and, as long as they are sweet, what matter whether they are real sugar or only French chalk?"

"All offered to *you* must be genuine—you need have no fear!" he answered her—and he meant it. As he looked down on the dazzling incognita, whose insouciant freedom had yet all the grace and charm taught by the breeding of courts and beaux mondes, though critical and very difficult to please, he confessed to himself that he had never seen anything more lovely out of the pastelles of La Tour, or the dreams of Titian, than this young and brilliant creature found thus strangely out of place, and alone, in a Bohemian boat that was carrying a load of peasant passengers to Auzig Fair!

Who could she be?—a lady of rank, *laissez faire* and untrammelled, amusing herself with the romances and caprices of a momentary incognita; a Princess of the Tuileries, or of the Quartier Bréda; a Serene Highness of some Sesquipedalian-Strelitz, sans state and sans suite; or a Comtesse sans Châteaux (save en Espagne), with a face and a grace more fatal to her prey than her vin mosseux and her skilful *écarté*? As yet it was impossible to tell, and with a lovely woman so ungracious an interrogation can never be put as the insolent question, "Who are you?"

She looked up and met his eyes bent on her, as the light of the sun setting behind the pine-woods lit up her face and form, as she leaned among her cushions, into Reuben-like richness, with a bright touch of

Fra Angelo and Carlo Dolce softness about the tableau.

“How strangely we meet, monsieur, on this clumsy little Czeschen boat! I came by water, because the night was so warm; and you came from the same reason? Ah! *C'est le destin, monsieur!* We were fated to meet again.”

“If fate will always serve me as kindly I will become a predestinarian to-morrow, and go in leading-strings with blind contentment!”

God help us!—how rashly we say things in this world. Long years afterwards we remember those idle, careless, unmeant words gaily uttered, and they come back to us like the distant mocking laughs of devils!—devils who tempted us, and now riot in their work.

“*C'est le destin!*” she said, smiling, her fair face, with its luminous eyes, looking the lovelier for that beaming coquettish smile. “But, monsieur, you have been my deliverer, may I not ask to know, who is it I have to thank for so daring a rescue as I owed to you in Prague?”

“Assuredly. My name is Strathmore—Cecil Strathmore.”

“Strathmore!” she repeated, musingly. “It is a very pretty name, and a good one. Then you are English, monsieur? And if so, you are thinking, of course, what a strange incorrect whim of mine it is for me to be travelling alone with only my maid in a

little Czeschen boat in the evening? You English are so *raides*, so prudish!"

Strathmore laughed, as he wound the shawls about her that had dropped aside.

"The English are (though I am neither of the two, believe me), but they generally verify Swift's aphorism, that 'a nice man is a man of nasty ideas;' the chill icing is only to conceal dirty water, and they freeze—to hide what lies below! But may not I claim similar confidence, and entreat to know by name one for whom no name is needed, it is true, to make one remember her?"

She laughed, and shook her head in denial so charming that it was worth fifty assents.

"No, I am travelling incognita. I cannot reveal that secret. I like Romance and Caprice, monsieur, they are feminine privileges, and following them I have found far more amusement than if I had gone in one beaten track between two blank walls of Custom and Prudence. It may have made me enemies; but, bah! who goes through life without them?"

"None! and never those who awaken envy. Dullness and mediocrity may live unmolested and unattacked, but people never tire of finding spots on a sun whose brilliance blinds them."

"Never!" she answered, with a naïve and amusing personal appropriation of his words. "If I had been born plain like some poor women, I should not have

had so many *siffleurs*; but then, on the other hand, my *clâque* would not have been so loud nor so strong; and the cheers always drown the hisses.”

“ You have had *siffleurs*? They must have bandaged their eyes, then, before taking so ungracious a rôle! Surely society hissed *them* for such atrocity?” said Strathmore, noticing the dazzling fairness of her skin and the exquisite contour of her form, and thinking to himself, “ The deuce! she makes me talk as absurd nonsense as the *Sabreur*!”

“ Of course it did, but *siffleurs* hiss on through all opposition, you know, monsieur——”

“ Because it pays them!”

“ No doubt. But, what do a few hisses matter, more or less, as long as one enjoys oneself in one’s youth—one’s delicious, irrecoverable youth? I suppose if I live long enough my hair will be white and my skin yellow, but I do not spoil my present by looking into the future. If it must come, let it take care of itself. It may never come—why mourn about it? Those people are *bécasses*, who work, and toil, and wear away all their good looks, and live hardly and joylessly only to hoard money to buy tisane, and nurses, and crutches, when all the zest of existence is gone from them, and given to a new generation that has pushed them out of their places? Doesn’t Balzac say, that whether one sweeps the streets with a broom or the Tuilleries with a velvet robe, it comes to much the same thing when one is old; the salt is equally out .

of the soup whether it is eaten in a *Maison Dieu* or in a ducal château!"

"Almost thou persuadest me to be an Epicurean!" smiled Strathmore, as he thought to himself, "Who on earth can she be?" and gazed down into her soft, laughing, lustrous eyes, languid yet coquettish, like the eyes of the women of Seville. "But I do not hold with you there, *ma belle inconnue*; to me it seems that with years alone can be gained what is worth gaining—power. The butterfly pleasure of youth can very well be spared for the ambitions that can only be reaped with maturity. A man has only become of real value, and able to grasp real sway, when he is near his grave?"

"Ah, for your sex that is all very well, your youth lasts to your tomb, but with us—*nous autres femmes!*—with our beauty flies our sceptre. How can we reign after youth, without youth? You will not care for a mistress who is wrinkled!" cried the belle blonde, impatiently, the impatience of a lovely coquette incensed to be contradicted. "So, you think power the only thing worth having? Then you do not care for love, monsieur, I presume?"

"Well!—I must confess, not much."

It was rank heresy in the presence of so fair a priestess of the soft religion, it was a fatal challenge to the one who heard it, though Strathmore spoke the cold, careless, simple truth, and did not heed whether he offended or piqued a chance acquaintance of the hour by it.

“And yet that man *will* love, fiercely, imperiously, bitterly one day!” thought the Neriad of the Moldau, who, a stranger to him, as he to her, read his character by a woman of the world’s clairvoyante perception, as he failed to read hers by a man of the world’s trained penetration. “For shame!” she said, aloud, striking him a fragrant blow with her sprigs of cherry-blossom. “If you are heretical enough to feel so, mon ami, you should not be unchivalric enough to say so! Your bay wreaths will be very barren and withered if you don’t weave some roses with them. Cæsar knew that. So you admire age because it will give you power; and I loathe it because it will rob me of beauty—what a difference! I wonder how we shall both meet it! But, bah! why talk of these things? The wind will be chilly, and the green leaves brown, and the ground frost-bound in six months’ time; but the butterflies playing there above our heads are too wise to spoil the sunshine by remembering the snows. *They* are Epicureans; let *us* be so too!”

To such a doctrine, expounded by such lips, it was impossible to dissent. The sunset faded, the purple mists stole on down the slopes of the hills, the west wind rose, bringing a rich odour from the pine forests; the Bohemian musicians, for a few coins, sang airs sweet enough to have been played by the legendary music-demons of a land where Mozart rules; the boat dropped slowly down the stream in the evening twilight, and Strathmore leant over the vessel’s side,

talking on to his chance acquaintance, and looking down on to the exquisite Titian-like picture that she made, reclining on her pile of cushions, with the black mantilla of lace thrown on her yellow hair, and her dark lustrous eyes gleaming softly and dreamily in the light of the summer stars. He was singularly critical of the beauty of women, and coldly careless of their wiles and charms; yet even he felt a vague dreamy pleasure in floating down the river in the sultry moonlit night thus, with the echo of this sweet silvery voice in his ear, and a face on which he looked in the gloaming, soft as the music that lingered on the silent air. He would not altogether have found the voyage wearisome though it had lasted till the dawn; but—pardieu, mes frères! one never drops *long* down any river, real or allegorical, with a smooth current and Arcadian landscapes, under the shade of pleasant woodlands, beneath which we would willingly linger till sunrise, but that we are safe to be soon startled by the rough grate of the keel on the sand, that breaks the spell for evermore!

It was so now; the boat ground in a shallow bit of the water where red sunken rocks made the navigation troublesome for a vessel so cumbersome, and boatmen so clumsy, as were those who now steered it down the Moldau's course. No harm was done that could be of serious account, but the boat was stuck hopelessly fast between the rocks, and could not proceed to Auzig that night, at all events; while its passengers had no choice but to remain where they were

till the sunrise, or to disembark at a landing-place which was luckily easily to be reached by a plank between the vessel and the shore, where, buried in the favourite cherry orchards of Bohemia, with a gaudy sign swinging under its dark red roof, half hidden in a profusion of giant hollyhocks, with linden-trees in full flower before the door, and the pine-covered hills stretching behind it, stood a little river-side Gasthof. The unknown, into whose society and in whose protection he was thus in a manner forced, laughed brightly, and made light of the contretemps when Strathmore explained it to her. “We must wait here?—very well! I like the smallest soupçon of an adventure. I will dine under those limes. I suppose they can find something to give us; but I must go on to-night if there be a vehicle procurable,” she said, gaily and good humouredly enough, without any feminine repining, as she gave him her hand to be assisted across the plank.

She was not altogether sorry to be able to retain as a *détenu* an English aristocrat, with a face like the Vandyke pictures; who was coldly indifferent to the soft creeds of which she was a head-priestess, and was a renegade and disbeliever in their faith. “Destiny throws us together, monsieur! We must be good friends. *Dieu le veut!*” she laughed, as Strathmore lifted her from the plank on to the landing-place, while the white soft hands lay in his, and the delicate fragrance of the perfumed hair floated across him, as the lace of her mantilla brushed his shoulder.

"I am the debtor of destiny, then!" he whispered, in answer, noting as she stood by him in the starlight the sweet grace and luxurious outline of her perfect form, that even the dark drapery of her travelling-dress, wrapped about in long voluminous folds, could not avail to hide.

Brothers mine!—it is well for us that we are no seers! Were we cursed with prevision, could we know how, when the idle trifle of the present hour shall have been forged into a link of the past, it will stretch out and bind captive the whole future in its bonds, we should be paralysed, hopeless, powerless, old ere ever we were young! It is well for us that we are no seers. Were we cursed with second sight, we should see the white shroud breast-high about the living man, the phosphor light of death gleaming on the youthful radiant face, the feathery seed lightly sown bearing in it the germ of the upas-tree, the idle careless word gaily uttered carrying in its womb the future bane of a lifetime; we should see these things till we sickened, and reeled, and grew blind with pain before the ghastly face of the Future, as men in ancient days before the loathsome visage of the Medusa!

CHAPTER V.

THE BONNE-AVENTURE TOLD UNDER THE LINDENS.

CONTRETEMPS generally have some saving crumbs of consolation for those who laugh at fate, and look good humouredly for them ; life's only evil to him who wears it awkwardly, and philosophic resignation, works as many miracles as Harlequin ; grumble, and you go to the dogs in a wretched style ; make mots on your own misery, and you've no idea how pleasant a *trajet* even drifting “to the bad” may become. So when the Czeschen boat grated on the land and stuck there, coming to grief generally and hopelessly, fortune was so propitiated by the radiant smile with which its own scurvy trick was received by the loveliest of all the balked travellers, that what would, under any other circumstances, have been the most provoking bore, became a little episode picturesque and romantic, and took a *couleur de rose* at once under the resistless magic of her sunny smile. It was a

beautiful night, starry, still, and sultry ; the river-side inn stood like a picture of Ostade, hidden in its blossomed limes ; the pine-woods stretched above and around, with the ruddy gleam of gipsy fires flashing between the boughs ; and with such a companion as hazard had given him, Strathmore could hardly complain of the accident, though he was a man who found the gleam of women's eyes in a cabinet particulier of a café, or a cabinet de toilette of a palace, far better than in all the uncomfortably-romantic situations in the world, and held that a little gallantry was infinitely more agreeable and rational in a rose-tendre-hung chamber than *à la belle étoile* in a damp midnight under the finest violet skies that ever enraptured a poet.

The little hostelry was already full of travellers. Some English *en route* to the waters of the Sprudel, some Moravians and Bohemians on their way to or from Bucharest or Auzig ; and the arrivals from the boat filled it to overflowing, for its accommodation was scant, and its attractions solely confined to its gaily-painted and blossom-buried exterior. There was but one common sitting-room, but one common supper-table, and the guests, whether gräffins or glass engravers, were treated without distinction ; a Bohemian Gasthof is about the only place upon earth where you see the doctrine of equality in absolute and positive practice. The Sclavonians, accustomed to it, took it unmurmuringly ; the English tourists grumbled unceasingly ; preserved (the ladies in especial) a dead

silence to companions for whose respectability they had no voucher ; scorned the sausage, the baked pie, the cucumber-soup, and the rest of the national *menu*, and solaced themselves with gloomy consumption of hard biscuits from their travelling-bags ; while without, under the lindens, on the sward before the door, Strathmore's Albanian servant making a raid upon the Gasthof larder with the celerity of long continental experience, spread on a little table the best fried trout, Töplitz and other fare that the inn afforded for the refreshment of the fair traveller with the Titian face, who, refusing to enter the hostelry, sat on a bench under the limes, leaning against the rough bark as gracefully as amongst velvet cushions, looking upward at Strathmore with her soft Orientalesque eyes, while the leaves and flowers of the boughs swayed against her yellow hair.

She gave a Tokay flavour to the Läger, a Vatel delicacy to the trout, a strange but charming spice of petits soupers to this primitive supper under the limes ; an unsuitable but delicious aroma of Paris to the solitary river-side hostelry in Bohemian pine-woods. "Who could she be ?" he wondered in vain ; for on that head, under the most adroit cross-questioning, she never betrayed herself. She talked gaily, lightly, charmingly, with some little wit, and a little goes a long way when uttered by such lips. With something, too, of soft graceful romance, probably natural to her, perhaps only learned second-hand from *Raphael*, and *Indiana*, and *Les Nuits*

d'Octobre; and Strathmore, though the light galantries of a Lauzun had little charm for him, and the only passion that could ever have stirred him from his coldness would have been the deep, voluptuous delight, fierce and keen as pain, that swayed Sulla and Cimon, could not refuse his admiration of a picture so perfect as she sat in the light of the mid-summer stars, leaning her head on her small jewelled hand, the lime-boughs drooping above her, and the dark, dimly-lit room within forming a Rembrantesque background, while the river below broke against the rocks, and the heavy odour of the lindens and pines filled the air.

“How cold he looks, this handsome Strathmore, does he dare to defy me ?” she thought, as she glanced upwards at him where he leaned against the trunk of the linden when the supper was finished, and while she herself still lingered under the limes as the stars grew larger and clearer in the May skies, and the purple haze of night deepened over the hills. He was the only man who had not bowed down at her feet at her first smile, and his calm courtesies piqued her.

“Do you like music, monsieur ?” she asked him, with that suddenness which had in it nothing abrupt, but was rather the suddenness of a fawn’s or an antelope’s swift graces. Then, without awaiting a reply, without apology or prelude, inspired by that caprice which rules all women more or less, and ruled this one at every moment and in every mood, she began to sing

one of the sweet, gay, familiar canzone of Figaro, with a voice at which the nightingales in the linden-leaves might have broken their little throats in envying despair. Then, without pause, she passed on to the sublime harmonies of the *Stabat Mater*—now wailing like the sigh of a vesper hymn from convent walls at even-song, now bursting into passionate prayer like the swell of a *Te Deum* from cathedral altar. She sang on without effort, without pause, blending the most incongruous harmonies into one strange, bizarre, weird-like yet entrancing whole, changing the *Preghiero* from Masaniello for one of Verdi's gayest arias, mingling Küken's Slumber Song with some reckless Venetian barcarolle, breaking off the solemn cadence of the *Pro Peccatis* with some mischievous chansonette out of the Quartier Latin, and welding the loftiest melodies of Handel's *Israel* with the laughing refrain of Louis Abadie's ballads.

Out on the still night air rose the matchless music of voice, rich, clear, thrilling, a very intoxication of sound; mingling with the ebb and flow of the waters, the tremulous sigh of the leaves, and the rival song of the birds in the boughs. Those sitting within in the darkened chamber listened spell-bound; the peasantry, laughing and chatting under the low roof of the hostelry, hushed their gossip in enchanted awe; the boatmen in the vessel moored in the shadow below looked up and left off their toil; and—as suddenly as it had rung out on the summer air, the exquisite melody ceased, and died away like the notes of a bell

off the silence of the night. She looked up at Strathmore, the starlight shining in the dreamy, smiling depths of her eyes, and saw that he listened eagerly, breathlessly, wonderingly, subdued and intoxicated even despite himself by the marvellous magic, the delicious intricacies, the luxurious richness of this voluptuous charm of song, with a spell which—the moment it ceased—was broken.

“ You like music ? ” she asked him, softly ; “ ah, yes, I see it in your face. You Englishmen, if you be as cold as they call you, have very eloquent eyes sometimes. Are you not thinking what an odd caprice it is for me to sing to you—a stranger—at ten o’clock at night, under lime-trees ? ”

“ Indeed, no ; I am far too grateful for the caprice. Pasta herself never equalled your voice ; it is exquisite, marvellous ! ”

She laughed softly.

“ Do you think so ? And yet, I imagine, you are very difficult to please ? When I sing some of those airs, the Inflammatus or the Agnus Dei, they make me think of the old days in my convent at Valladarra ; how I used to beat my wings and hate my cage, and long to escape over the purple mountains. Why is it, I wonder, that a gloomy past often looks brighter than a brilliant present ? —what is there in the charm of Distance to give such a golden chiaroscuro ? ”

“ Valladarra ? Are you a Spaniard, madame ? ” he asked her, catching at any clue that might enlighten

him as to the whence and the whither of the bewitching creature.

“A Spaniard? What makes you think so?”

“Because it is usually said, belle amie, that a Spanish blonde is the greatest marvel of beauty that the world ever sees,” said Strathmore, with a smile.

She laughed.

“Je vous remercie! Well, perhaps I am Spanish. You would like to know? Ah, bah! what a slander on my sex it is to say that Eve monopolised all curiosity!”

“Curiosity!” repeated Strathmore. “There may, surely, be a deeper interest that bears a better name, madame? When one lights on a matchless gem, or on a rarely lovely foreign flower, it is not unnatural that one may seek to know where it has come from, and where we may see it again.”

“You are a courtier, M. Strathmore, and turn your phrases very prettily,” said this most *provoquante* of all women, with the slightest possible shrug of her shoulders. “But it *is* curiosity, for all that; and, by all the rights of womanhood, I claim my title to the first indulgence of the privilege. Your name is Strathmore, and your servant calls you ‘My lord,’ and if asked about your country, you would answer, ‘*Civis Romanus sum,*’ with true Britannic bombast, I dare say. Well! England *is* figuratively rather like Rome, for it slays its Senecas, gorges its Vitel-

liuses, and is often garrisoned by ganders ! But one more thing remains to know. *What are you ?*"

Leaning her arms on the table, her chin on her hands, and resting her eyes upon him, she asked the point-blank question with the most charming insouciance and assurance of command ; and Strathmore could not fail to satisfy her demand, though he was not fond of talking of himself ; his egotism was of a much loftier sort.

" Ah ! a diplomatist !" she said, raising her eyebrows. " Mon ami, I know your order : but you will not content yourself with settling internecine squabbles, and writing Cretan labyrinths of words, and being 'sent home,' like an expelled schoolboy, if your two countries quarrel for a split hair, will you ? You will want the triumph of the monstrari digito, and the guidance of the helm through stormy waters, and you will pine for the old Medici and Strozzi days, when a stealthy arm could stretch and strike far away in a distant land, and a subtle brain could compass the supreme rule, and wield it, troubled by no scruples."

" Madame," said Strathmore, with a slight laugh, his laugh was usually cold, " if you draw such a sketch of me at first sight—though I don't really deny its accuracy—I fear I cannot have impressed you very favourably ? "

" Why so ? You are ambitious, by your own confession that you covet age for the sake of power ;

and ambitious men are all alike. If you had your own will, you *ambitieux* would check at no flights; and if we don't have the Medici and Strozzi secret murders in our day, I am afraid the virtue that refrains from them is nothing very much better than fear of the analytical chemists."

As she spoke, with a certain smile on her rose lips, and in the mocking light of her gazelle eyes, something in this brilliant and witching creature struck upon Strathmore as dangerous—almost as repulsive—and made him think of those women who gleam out from the pages of Guicciardini and Galluzzi, who dazzled all men who looked on them with the shine of their *tresse d'oro*, or the languor of their Southern eyes, yet whose white hands shook the philtre into the loving-cup, and whose title was "Opra d'incanti è di malie fattura." But the momentary impression passed off as she looked up laughing.

"Bah, M. Strathmore! Ambition is a weary work at its ripest; epicurean enjoyment is far better: 'gather your rosebuds while you may.' Old Herrick is the true philosopher!"

"Spoken by such lips, his theories are irresistible," smiled Strathmore; "only if one has the bad taste not to care much about the roses, how then? There can be nothing for it but to entreat some fair priestess of the creed to take one's conversion in hand."

"But converts have to pass through fiery ordeals; if you are wise you would not brave them. You

despise love, mon ami ; it will be the worse for you some day."

"I shall have no fear for the future ; if I escape to-night untouched, I must, indeed, be clad in proof," smiled Strathmore. But the smile, like the compliment, did not please her ; its flattery was contemptuous and derisive of her power. With quick intuition she saw that Strathmore had never been in love in his life, and would have defied any woman to make him so ; and she smiled as she leant her head upon her arm, silent for once, playing with one of the lime-blossoms, and knowing that the moonlight was shining on a perfect picture which could not be improved, which might be broken by, speech. Strathmore was silent too ; busied in restless, vague conjecture as to who and what this brilliant, capricious, dazzling, graceful creature could be, here thus alone, at night, travelling through Bohemia. While his eyes rested on her where she sat in the starlight, her beauty well befitting the sultry night, that was odorous with the fragrance of the limes and musical with the murmurs of the waters, breaking below against the rocks, the voice of a Zingara broke on his reverie and hers, as a gipsy-girl—one of a party camped among the pine-woods at the back of the Gasthof—drew near the group of lindens in the moonlight ; a wild, dark, handsome Bohemian, with a scarlet hood over her jetty hair, and her glittering eyes fixed longingly on the jewels that sparkled on

the hands of the fair inconnue, as she said, in a compound of Czeschen and Romany,

“Will you hear your fortune, fair lady? Let the Gitâna tell you your future.”

The blonde aux yeux noirs, whose head was resting thoughtfully upon her hand, started, and looked up in surprise as the handsome black-browed Arab, who might have sat to Murillo or Salvator, approached her in the moonlight from the wooded shadows of the pine-forests behind them.

“Let me prophesy for you, fair lady! I can look on the palm of your hand and foretel you all things that will come to you; the predictions of Redempta, daughter of Phara, can never fail,” chanted the Zingara, in a wild, monotonous recitative, that sounded hoarse and sad in the still summer night as she drew nearer, her eyes glistening longingly on the sapphire rings.

“Non, merci!” laughed the bright incognita, looking upward at the strange picturesque form of the Gitâna, standing out in the starlight against the dark woods behind. “I know my past and my present—it is plenty! I do not trouble myself a moment for the future!”

“But in the past and the present lie the seed to bear fruit in the future!”

The words spoken in Czeschen sounded ominous and mournful, falling from the lips of the Gitâna like an augury of ill; and the other shuddered a little as she heard, though without comprehending, them.

“What does she say?” she asked of Strathmore. He translated them to her, and spoke to the gipsy-girl in her own tongue, bidding her move away; but the capricious songstress, whom the fancy of the moment swayed as completely as it sways a kitten or a child, laid her hand on his arm as he stood beside her.

“No, no! don’t send her away! She is like a picture of Murillo. Let us hear some of her prophecies first. What would she say to you, I wonder? I have a great curiosity to know your fate, my lord; the fate of a man who desires age and despises love! It must be an odd one! Come! cross her hand, and let her tell your *bonne-aventure*. Obey me at once! It is my whim and my pleasure, monsieur. Give her some silver, and ask her your destiny!”

A lovely woman is never to be disobeyed without courtesy, and pretty caprices are commands. With the white jewelled fingers lying on his arm, with the perfumy hair shining in the starlight, with the fair dazzling face upraised in the shadow of the linden-boughs, the sternest stoic could not have refused to chime in with her fancy, and please this charming tyrant in her most airy nonsense. Strathmore laughed, dropped a gold coin into the Gitâna’s brown hand, and, leaning against the trunk, stood awaiting his destiny from the coral lips of the handsome Arab in the silence of the summer night, while the distant lights of the gipsy fires gleamed fitfully through the dark pine-woods. The Zingara looked not at his hand, but up at his face, as the white, clear rays of the moon fell

on it—on the aquiline outline of the features and the varied meanings of the physiognomy, on the proud and generous sweetness of the mouth, contradicted by the dark passions in the eyes and the cold straight line of the brows. She looked at him long and fixedly in silence, with a dreamy, vague stare in her own fathomless eyes, while her hands moved over the beads of a string of Egyptian berries :

“There will be love, and of the love sin, and of the sin crime, and of the crime a curse. And the curse will pursue with a pitiless bitterness and an unslackened speed, and when atonement is sought and made, lo ! it may turn to ashes and to gall. The innocent may taste thereof, and share the doom they have not woven. Your woe will be wrought by your own hand, and you will eat of the fruit of your own past, and through you will come death. Redempta, the daughter of Phara, has spoken !”

The words fell slowly and sadly on the silence of the night, while the river-waves beat against the rocks with monotonous murmur, and the sough of the wind arose in the pine-forest, sweeping with a sudden chill through the sultry air ; and as he heard them, a momentary shudder ran through Strathmore’s veins at the destiny that the Gitâna vaguely shadowed forth ; an irrepressible coldness, like that which comes from the touch of a corpse, passed over him where he stood. And the incognita clung closer to him, her white hand closing on his arm, and her laughing lips turning pale :

"Mon Dieu ! what a terrible fate ! Send her away. She makes me tremble !"

Strathmore laughed, the impression of the ominous prophecy passing off as soon as it was made ; and he threw another gold dollar to the Zingara :

"My handsome Arab ! you might have been more courteous, certainly. If you wish your predictions to be popular, you must make them a little more lively. Be off with you ! Go and frighten the peasants yonder !"

"Redempta can say only that which she sees," murmured the Gitâna, sadly and proudly, as she stooped for the gold where it shone on the turf, and turned slowly away, till her form was lost in the dense gloom cast by the shadow in the woods.

"What a horrible destiny !" said his companion again, not able so quickly to shake off the vague terror with which the sing-song chanting recitative of the Zingara had haunted her.

"She has terrified you ?" laughed Strathmore. "I am sorry for that, madame ; you shouldn't have tempted prophecy in my behalf. All seers from the religious world to the gipsy camp must make their predictions ominous, or they would carry no weight ; and evil is so generally predominant in this life, that to croak is pretty sure to be on the right side."

"Ah, mon Dieu ! do not jest !" cried the belle inconnue, with a little shiver of pretty terror. "It is no laughing matter, such a horrible future."

"But it *is* a laughing matter, such a horrible *bonne-*

aventure,” said Strathmore, smiling, and thinking how lovely she looked as she shivered with pretty pretended fear, and clasped her hands, on which he noticed a mass of brilliant rings that might have belonged to an empress’s toilette-boxes, but which didn’t tell him much, since paste is very glittering, and defies detection by moonlight. “She deals in the Terrible—prophets always do, or what sway would they have over their dupes? You should have let her have told yours, madame; she would have given something better to the lines in so beautiful a hand.”

“Ah, bah!” cried the incognita, shaking off her superstition with a sweet silvery laugh. “I know my future! I shall triumph by my beauty till that goes, and then I shall triumph by my intellect, which won’t go. I shall tread my way on roses, and rule as Venus Victrix till grey hairs come and I have to take to enamelling; and then I shall change my sceptre, and begin *écarté*, embroglie, prudence, and politics. But I don’t count on the change; I am not like you, and do not court Age——”

“Because you are not like me, and need not wait for Age to bring you Power; *your* power lies in a glance of the eyes and in all the ‘purpureal light of youth’!” laughed Strathmore. “I fancy our ambition centres alike in ruling men, but—with a difference!”

“You are very secure in your future, despite all the Gitâna’s fortelling?” she asked him, with a curious glance, half-malicious, half-interested.

“ Surely ! We can make of our future what we like. Life is clay, to be moulded just at our will ; it is a fool, or an unskilful workman, indeed, who lets it fall of itself into a shape he does not like, or lets it break in his hands.”

“ But one flaw may crack the whole ! ” said the fair stranger, as Strathmore’s valet drew near them to announce the immediate departure of a clumsy vehicle, the only one the Gasthof could furnish, that had been engaged before their arrival by English travellers, and in which, at her urgent instance, Strathmore had taken the sole remaining places for herself and her maid. “ Are they starting ? I am ready ! My lord, I owe you more gratitude still ; how deeply I grow in your debt ! But I forgot ; if I take these two places, you must remain under that miserable little red roof till to-morrow. I ought not to have done it ; *mais—je suis egoïste moi !* ”

“ No matter ! I am most happy to relinquish anything in your service,” said Strathmore, as he took the hand held out to him within his own. He did not care about women, but this one was specially lovely and specially captivating, and thrown as she was on his courtesy, he could not refuse it her. “ I shall sleep under the pines ; it will not be the first time I have camped out, but, I confess, I was tempted to make you a prisoner, madame, perforce to-night, by bidding Diaz let the car go without you. Give me some praise for my self-abnegation ! ”

His voice was very melodious, and had a softness

when he was quite guiltless of intending it, while his features, with their cold, proud Velasquez type, on which the passions that had never been roused still threw their shadow, had always a fascination for women, who, by the instinct of contradiction ever dominant in their sex, always seek to chain a man from whose hands their fetters slip. Her bright, soft, dazzling eyes looked up to his almost tenderly in the light of the midsummer stars :

“I will thank you when we meet again !”

“*When !* But what gage do you give me that we may ever do so ? You refuse me any name, any address, any single clue ; you oblige me to part from you in ignorance even of ——”

“Who I am ! The first question you Englishmen ask before you give your hand in friendship, or speak to your neighbour at a table d’hôte,” interrupted the bright *capricieuse*, with a low, ringing laugh. “No ! I will not give you even a clue. It will be a Chinese puzzle for your ingenuity. When we meet (and we shall ; we are both in the world ; we are cards of the same pack, and shall some time or other be shuffled together !), I will thank you for all your courtesy and chivalry, and pay my debt—comme vous voudrez ! Till then, you must submit to mystery. I may be a *prima donna*, a *dame d’industrie*, a *princess incognita*, a dangerous Greek—you may think me whatever you like. You will remember me better if you are left in perplexity ; your sex always covet the unattainable,

and there is a golden charm in mystery that shall veil me—till we meet!"

"But!—what a cruel caprice! what an indefinite probation!"

"Do you good, mon ami! Perhaps you have never had to wait before; I fancy so! There! *they* are waiting, and we must part, monsieur. Adieu and au revoir!"

Tantalising, obstinate, capricious, wilful, wayward, but bewitching; all the more bewitching for that very quintette of faults—she let her hand linger in his where they stood in the shadow, with the moon shining on her upraised face, and the lime-blossoms swaying against her hair, delicately scented as the fragrance of their flowers, as he stooped towards her in farewell: a soft, subtle, amber-scented perfume, such as the tresses of Lesbia might have borne as she came from her odorous bath, or wound the roses amongst them at the banquet—a perfume that as he caught it had something of the same soft intoxication as her voice had carried with it in her song.

Another moment, and the hand that had lain in his, soft and warm as a bird, had unloosened its clasp, and the clumsy covered cart of the Gasthof, laden with its passengers, had rolled slowly from the door beneath the roofing of the lime-boughs, *la blonde aux yeux noirs* leaning out from its heavy tarpaulin, and looking at him with a gay farewell smile—leaving according to her vow, with the golden veil of mystery

flung over her lovely, dazzling face, soft with Eastern languor, and bright with the brilliance of youth, that disappeared from his sight as the car, creaking slowly over the moss, was lost in the shadows of the pine-woods as it turned a bend in the hills, and left him behind—alone.

“Who the deuce can she be? Something very out of the common, talking to one at first sight about love, and singing to the nightingales, *au clair de la lune!* I never saw a lovelier creature in my life, nor a more nonchalante one; and yet she isn’t exactly Quartier Bréda style; she has more the look of a court than a casino. Who the deuce can she be?” wondered Strathmore, as he threw himself down on the moss under the limes, smoking and throwing stones idly into the river that flowed below. He knew most courts and most cities; he lived chiefly abroad, and thought he knew every beauty in monde or demi-monde, sovereigns of the left hand as of the right. The numberless anomalies in this dazzling *inconnue* piqued his curiosity—the first of her sex who had ever so far excited him. Strathmore thought romance simply insanity, and had lived at too thorough a pace to care to twist a chance into an adventure, and make poetic material out of a rencontre with a stranger, as other men might have done. But he thought of her, and of little save her, where he lay smoking, while the river broke against its overhanging banks, and the heavy odours of the pines rolled down from the hills above. And as he mused over the bright

capricious mystery that had come and gone suddenly as a swallow comes and goes through the air, and listened to the distant chimes of churches and monasteries, tolling out the shorts ummer hours as the night wore away, to the villages sleeping below, he only thought once, as he caught the gleam of the camp-fires flashing fitfully in the darkness from the gloom of the pine-woods, with the dark lurid glare of a Rembrandt scene, while their flames leapt up through the fan-like boughs of the firs, of the destiny the Zingara girl had foretold him ; and then he smiled as he remembered the prophecy the Gitâna had made.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WHITE DOMINO POWDERED WITH GOLDEN
BEEES.

“NOT seen La Vavasour!—mon chèr you have yet to live!” yawned Arthus de Bellus, Vicomte and Chambellan du Roi.

Cards and gold lay on the table in confusion in Strathmore’s room at Meurice’s; four or five men had been dining with him, and had been playing baccarat for the last hour or two, as more piquant than the olives and more tasteful than the Burgundies they had trifled with and left.

It was about twelve months since his run down the Moldau; affairs threatening to the peace of the Principalities had kept him much longer than he had imagined, and this was the first night of his arrival in Paris, free for a little time after his negotiations with Prince Michel, though he meant to leave again

as soon as the races were run at Chantilly, where his own chesnut, Maréchale, stood a good second for the French Derby.

“*Yet to live!*” he said, lying back in his arm-chair and curling a leaf round his cigarette. “My life don’t hang in women’s eyes, thank Heaven! I can exist very comfortably without seeing your divine Vavasour for the next twenty years, if that’s all, and by that time I suspect nobody will care much about seeing her; your superb Helen will be like most other Helens of a certain age then; décolletée to a disadvantage, ruddled with rouge, jealous of her daughters, and fat (or scraggy), *a faire frémir!*”

“Blasphemer, hold your tongue!” cried Bellus. “What a future for La Vavasour! She would poison herself with a bonbon, or die of a bouquet of heliotrope, before she’d exist for such a degradation!”

“Très cher, she *may* be a spoiled beauty, but she can’t change the laws of nature. Briedenbach and Bulli haven’t the *Breuvage de Ninon* in their treasury, and to be steeled against and disenchanted with the loveliest mistress, one has only to remember—*what she will be!*”

“Or—to see what she *is*, sometimes, even will do,” laughed the Vicomte. “Full dress, what lovely figures they have! but the embonpoint is dreadfully fictitious with certain divinities we know!”

“And so is the bloom! However, so as they look

well that's all they think about," laughed Strathmore. "I always make up my mind, though, to enamel, &c.; I should die of a mistress who was *bête*, and their wit's rarely worth much till they've come to their first touch of rouge."

"The Lady Vavasour is alone an exception ; her bloom is her own—as yet ; but her mots are perfection. You must see her, Strathmore ; she'll make you recant that heterodoxy."

"I don't the least think she will," said Strathmore, giving a spin to one of the gold pieces. "My dear Arthus, I have seen so many of those divine beauties, those dames du monde, those Helens à la mode. I admire them ; they are delightfully bred ; they are perfectly *gantées, chaussées, coiffées, tirées à quatre épingles* ; they are charming to talk to in their own boudoirs, where the light is half veiled, and your eyes are the same ; they are admirable when you want a little love à *discretion*, with Cupid delicately scented with *bouquet*, and with pleasant platonics as elastic as india-rubber. I admire them ; but I have seen so many ; there can be nothing so *very* new in the salons ! Your exquisite Marchioness may be the best of the kind, but then—one knows the kind so well ! Who was she, by-the-by ?"

"Well ! nobody knows exactly," said Lyster Gage, of the British Legation, reluctant to admit such a flaw in this idol as that she had not a pedigree to flutter in the face of the world, blazoned with bezants

of gold, and rich in heraldic quarterings. “When she appeared at St. Petersburg, you know she was already Marchioness of Vavasour ; it was said that the Marquis had married her in the Mauritius when she was fifteen—those Creoles are women so early. I never heard anything more definite, but his sixteen quarterings are quite wide enough to cover any deficiencies, and her divine beauty did the rest ; she became the fashion at once, and she has reigned the queen of pleasures, caprices, and the salons ever since, here. Her circle is as exclusive as the Princesse de Lurine’s ; it is only plain women who dare to hint her as ‘adventuress.’”

“Adventuress!—adventurer! That is the name the world gives any man or woman who dares to be clever, brilliant, or successful out of the old routine! The world must have its revenge! Society falls down before the Juggernaut of a Triumph, but, *en revanche*, it always throws stones behind it. I detest Creoles—those black-browed, lazy, inert women, who have fattened on sugar-canies, and learned to scold slaves instead of to spell! I shall not admire your matchless Peeress.”

“Peste!” said the Chambellan du Roi, settling the diamond stud in his wristband. “If you *don’t*, you’ll be the first man in Europe who’s braved her. The utmost any of them can do is to only let their eyes be dazzled, and not lose their heads. As Tilly said of Gustavus, ‘c’est un joueur contre qui de rien perdre’

est de beaucoup gagner.' It is lucky Lord Vavasour is no Georges Dandin !"

"Bah! So he gave her his rank, and gets rewarded with dishonour! It's always the way! That's the common coin in which wives pay their gratitude," laughed Strathmore, with a dash of disgust.

"Dishonour? Fie, fie, Strathmore!" cried the Earl of Lechmere, a good-natured fellow, in the Coldstreams. "Nobody uses those coarse, ugly dictionary words now-a-days, except when one wants to get up a duel. Vavasour's a wise man. They sign a mutual Roving Commission, and don't trouble each other to know where the cruise extends. Besides, madame's amitiés *may* be only friendship; some say so, and swear she's so heartless, that her pretty, dainty brodequins dance fireproof over red-hot ploughshares that would sear tenderer feet to the bone."

"I don't believe in miracles, thank you!" said Château-Renard, of the Guides. "She must get scorched *en passant*, at any rate. You'll see her to-night, Strathmore, I expect, but if she don't unmask—"

"The sun will stay behind a cloud. Very well! I shall endure it. I never exist on that sort of rays at any time. I'm getting tired, too, of Mondes one confounds so easily with Demi-Monde, and Aristocrates that are so near allied to Anonyma. I should rather have liked those old times when dishonour got a taste of cold steel. Now, your

husband is as obliging as Galba to Mecænas!" yawned Strathmore. "The lady goes to Baden 'till the gossip's blown over,' and her lord is discreetly silent, and doesn't trouble himself to notice what goes on before his eyes. Unless, indeed, he thinks he can turn the scratch on his scutcheon to pecuniary account, and make out of the crim. con. a neat little sum to stop the hole in his exchequer, or cover his Goodwood debts; *then* he becomes as anxious as his counsel to prove his own dishonour, and takes the co-respondent's money with a chuckling compassion for the poor devil that's bought the damaged article and doesn't know very well what to do with it! That's the style in England, and these Vavasours are 'of us.' "

"*Que le diable te prenne, Strathmore!*" cried Bellus. "Don't be so bitter! You're much more fit for the Middle Ages than you are for the present day."

"I think I am. Things were called by their right names then; men sharpened their steel, and struck a straight, swift blow; now they sharpen their pen, and wound in the back, sheltered under a shield of anonymity. Then they had 'honour,' and held it at the sword's point; now they've mock 'morality,' have lawyers to defend it (which is something like giving an artificial lily to a sweep to keep unsoiled), and trade in their shame, and ask for 'costs' for every stain, from a blackened eye to a blasted name! Caramba! this claret is corked!"

"Uncommonly inconvenient times ; your favourite ones, though, old fellow," said Lechmere. "One would be in perpetual hot water. Fancy an inch of cold steel waiting for us at the bottom of every *escalier dérobé*, and an iron gauntlet dashed on our lips every time we laughed away a lady's reputation. Where *should* we all be ? It would be horribly troublesome."

"No doubt ! We're much wiser now. We chat amicably in the clubs with the husband after leaving madame's dressing-room. I don't dispute our expediency ; it's a quality in the highest cultivation in the age ; even Aspasia now-a-days takes the Communion to wash away her sins in Sacramental Tent. A propos of Aspasia, Vernon-Caderousse is fettered hand and foot by Viola Vé ; she boasts that she will ruin a Peer of France every *trimestre*. Take care of yourself, Bellus!"

"Yes, for she'll keep her boast, the little demon !" laughed the Vicomte. "She might begin with a more profitable speculation than the 'Duca senza Ducati,' as La Marillia calls him ; Caderousse is all but 'gone.' I wish he would smash quite ; I should bid for that Petitôt snuff-box of his, the Ariadne à Naxos."

"So much for friendship ! Take a pinch out of my snuff-box to-day, and bid for it to-morrow ; sup with me on Monday, and speculate on my sales on Tuesday. I think you'll have your wish, Arthus. Vé would ruin a millionaire, and will make very short work of Caderousse. She should net Tchemeidoff ; Russians are the best prey ; the Rosières revel in their

roubles, and the lords of the serfs are the slaves of the serail," said Strathmore, as his guests rose to leave and dress for a bal masqué in the Faubourg St. Germain, at the Duchesse de Luilhier's, an inauguraterix of a thousand modes that passed the time for her own thorough-bred set, and served for talk for half Paris. "What are you all going for? It's so early yet—only twelve."

"Horrid bore!" yawned Lechmere; "but one's on the treadmill, and one must tramp along with it, that's the worst. Everybody goes to the Luilhiers."

"Stay and play, Lechmere," said Strathmore. "You're all off, I do believe, for the sake of this Vavasour. For shame, Bellus; *et tu Brute!* I *did* think better of you, on my life. I never dreamt that sort of thing survived in anybody after twenty."

"You haven't seen her," said the Vicomte, pettishly. "Bah! she does what she likes with one."

"A very self-evident fact, très cher! If you like to be slaves of a domineering, lazy Creole, *be* it; I don't understand your taste, that's all; but then I suppose I'm exceptional altogether; I don't like olives, and I don't care about women."

"Quite right," swore the Earl, under his moustaches; "both of 'em make you buy the nice rose flavour with too salt a bitterness."

"I don't know anything about the bitterness, thank God; I never travelled to that stage," laughed Strathmore; "but olives tempt one to drink, and women tempt one to weakness, and when either the love or

the brandy's taken too strong, we lose our heads and tell our secrets ; and, on the whole, I think two bottles less detrimental than one woman ! Wine steals our wits, but Dalilah does worse ;—because she's a tongue to ask questions."

" Devil take your philosophy."

" Much obliged. I don't wish any devil to take it, male or female, Belphegor or Melusine. ' My mind to me a kingdom is.' I should be specially sorry for any raids to be made on it."

" I bet you fifty to one, Strath, you adore la Vavasour when you see her."

" *I?* This Vavasour tyrant. I bet you a thousand to one I don't even admire her."

" In Naps ?—done ! It's a heavy bet, mon ami," said Château-Renard, entering the wager in a little dainty jewelled book, a gift of S. A. R. the volage, and somewhat indiscreet Princesse de Lurine.

" And a very safe one for me," said Strathmore, with a slight yawn. " If you don't make your wagers more discreetly, Armand, it's not much to be wondered at that you come to grief at Sartory and Chantilly as you do. Au revoir, if you will go. We meet again at Philippi, I suppose, in an hour ?"

" I promised the Sabreur to give him correct notes of the Vavasour. I must notice her if she comes here to-night," thought Strathmore, as he lay back in a dormeuse before the fire, when he was left alone, finishing his cigarette, while the firelight danced on the marble bronze and ormolu of the mantelpiece, and

the gas shone on the gold lying on the table, and on the wines that stood in a dozen decanters on the console. “I can picture her perfectly—a tawny, large, black-browed, voluptuous woman, silent, sensual, handsome, heavy, with a brow of Egypt, a Juno figure, and a West Indian languor. She *takes* because of her luxurious outline and her Creole indolence, and because she’s a new style, and has done two clever strokes of diplomacy, by persuading an English Peer to marry her, and a thorough-bred set to make her Queen of the Ton. She must have been very adroit—these silent, still-life women often cover matchless finesse ; nobody suspects them of the manufacture till the web is woven. What could the Marquis be about ? However, he was three parts a fool, they used to say, I think, and women make idiots of wiser men if once they’re allowed to have their own way. I dare say his yacht anchored off Martinique, and one day, when he was very hot and very languid, intensely bored, and had drunk a good deal of brandy, this woman had him alone in a verandah, where she lay fanning herself amidst a pile of flowers, with the air scented with pastelles, and everything planned to take him in a moment of weakness, and looked so handsome that she did what she liked with him, and made him say what he couldn’t unsay. So much is done in that sort of way ; there would be no marriages at all if men kept their heads cool always, but they’re taken at a disadvantage, just after dinner, when they’re lazy, and would consent to anything

or after the champagne at supper, when they talk nonsense they'd never have committed themselves to at noon ; or in the whirl of a waltz, when the turns of the dance turn their heads ! If we were always what we are between breakfast and luncheon, we should never love at all. We're cold after our matutinal mocha, but we're easily fooled after our dinner coffee. What we defy in the morning light, we yield to in the moonlight. Women know that ; this Lady Vavasour, I dare say, lured her lord into his declaration when the stars were shining on the mango-groves and on the green sea-vines, or perhaps—more likely—she was a *nouvelle riche*, and brought him money. Men barter their good blood now-a-days ; soiling the scutcheon don't matter if they gild over the dirt ; we don't sell our souls to the Devil in this age, we're too Christian, we sell them to the Dollar!"

With which satirical reflection on his times, and his order, drifting through his mind, Strathmore's thoughts floated onward to a piece of statecraft then numbered among the delicate diplomacies and intricate embroglio of Europe, whose moves absorbed him as the finesse of a problem absorb a skilful chess-player ; and from thence stretched onwards to his future, in which he lived like all men of dominant ambition far more than he lived in his present. It was a future brilliant, secure, brightening in its lustre and strengthening in its power with each successive year ; a future which was not to him as to most wrapped in a chiaro'scuro with only points of luminance gleaming through the

mist, but in whose cold glimmering light he seemed to see clear and distinct, as we see each object of the far-off landscape stand out in the air of a winter's noon, every thread that he should gather up, every distant point to which he should pass onward; a future singular and characteristic, in which state-power was the single ambition marked out, from which the love of women was banished, in which pleasure and wealth were as little regarded as in Lacedæmon, in which age would be courted not dreaded, since with it alone would come added dominion over the minds of men, and in which, as it stretched out before him, failure and alteration were alike impossible. What, if he lived, could destroy a future that would be solely dependent on, solely ruled by, himself? By his own hand alone would his future be fashioned,—would he hew out any shape save the idol that pleased him? When we hold the chisel ourselves, are we not secure to have no error in the work? Is it likely that our hand will slip, that the marble we select will be dark-veined, and brittle, and impure, that the blows of the mallet will shiver our handiwork, and that when we plan a Milo, god of strength, we shall but mould and sculpture out a Läocoon of torture? Scarcely! and Strathmore held the chisel, and, certain of his own skill, was as sure of what he should make of life as Benvenuto, when he bade the molten metal pour into the shape that he, master-craftsman, had fashioned, and give to the sight of the world the Winged Per-

seus. But Strathmore did not remember what Cellini did—that one flaw might mar the whole !

The rooms were filled when he ascended the staircase and entered the first of that suite of superb salons where Madame de Luilhiers gathered about her her own particular and exclusive set, and reigned supreme. Her ball was a replica of a *bal de l'opéra*, with a dash of the brilliance of the Regency, a time the Duchesse loved to resuscitate ; scandal, indeed, said that she loved it so well that she enacted the rôle of the Marquise de Parabère with a descendant of Monseigneur d'Orléans ; but—*taisons nous !*—scandal is ever indiscreet, and never true, we know, save here and there, when it hits the defenceless, or besmears the fallen, or so delicately stabs our bosom friend that we haven't heart to forswear it ! The low hum of many voices, that sound which, subdued and harmless as the musical hum of gnats, yet buzzes away the peace of entire lives, and murmurs death-blows to a myriad of reputations, filled the rooms as he moved slowly through the throng of glittering dominoes, broidered with gold or studded with jewels, while brilliant eyes smiled recognition on him through their masks, and witty badinage was whispered to him by fair incognite.

“ Deucedly like life, mon cher—eh ? People take advantage of disguise to slander at their ease, and under a mask the dastard grows daring and whispers a scandal, or—what's as bad—a truth ! Very like life ! Under the domino how suavely they stab their foes, and unrecognised in the vicinity of his dear

friends how secure a man is to overhear them damning his name!" laughed Strathmore to Château-Renard as he passed him in the vestibule, and went on to chat with the Comtesse de Chantal, a bewitching little brune, who had confided to him the colour of her adorable rose domino, and would quickly have been recognised without any other guide than her bright marmoset eyes.

"The domino gives one the privilege of *laissez-faire* and *laissez-parler*; it would be very pleasant if the world were one long bal masqué," said Madame la Comtesse, letting the eyes in question rest on him with coquette brilliance, for Strathmore was much courted by the sex he contemned.

"Madame! I think it *is* one. Who is there in it without a disguise?" he answered her, laughing, as they moved on to the ball-room through the crowd of titled maskers, while the music echoed from the distance, and the lights gleamed on the gorgeous dresses of those bidden to the Duchesse's fête à la Régence.

"Who, indeed! Not even Lord Cecil Strathmore, since he disdains women, yet he flirts with one!" murmured a whisper at his side.

"Who spoke, Cecil?" said the Comtesse, slightly disgusted with the style of the attack.

"Some one of your court jealous of my distinction, madame," laughed Strathmore, as he thought to himself, "I would swear the voice was a woman's," and turned to see who had recognised him with his mask on. Among the crowd of dominoes near, the one closest to him was white, powdered with golden bees.

“Fi donc ! it was a woman : a man would have attacked *me*, not you,” said Madame de Chantal, giving him a blow of her fan, a little jealous of the domino that Strathmore’s eyes were tracking ; more jealous still, when dexterously disentangling himself from her, he left her with Bellus, and followed the white domino in its swift passage through the crowd, that would have been a crush in any other salons than those of the Hôtel Luilhiers : followed on an impulse vague and irresistible, as he had never before followed the voice of a woman. With whatever swiftness and dexterity he traced her, she perpetually eluded him ; though she never turned her head, he would have sworn she knew he was pursuing her (women, like flies, know all that goes on behind them), and she seemed to take a perverse delight in winding in and out interminable mazes, and in letting him approach her only to escape him ; the white folds of the domino, with its glittering golden bees fluttering in the light, ever within tantalising reach, and ever at provoking distance. At last, when he was tired of the chase, and on the point of giving it up, her own passage was obstructed ; he pushed hastily forward and overtook her in the Pavillon de Flore, a winter garden, where Louise de Luilhiers had the tropics reproduced under glass in all their Oriental heat and Oriental fragrance, and in which the maskers were moving, amidst the broad leaves and glowing creepers of the East, while the falling waters of innumerable fountains cooled the

air, and subdued lights gleamed through the dark tropical foliage, like fire-flies in a palm grove.

"If I disdain all women, I have followed one. Belle dame, whoever you be, I may trust your reproof to me shows some sign of interest in him you condemned," whispered Strathmore in her ear.

Though she had penetrated his disguise, he could not penetrate hers ; shrouded in her domino she defied detection, and by her voice he could not recognise her in the least. He only saw, as she turned her head, that her eyes laughed, shining brightly as stars, and that the lovely mouth below her mask had the bloom of youth on its lips, like the soft bloom on an untouched peach.

"Not at all ! You are far too presumptuous, and if you disdain all women, you cannot care what one of them thinks of you. You have only pursued me because I eluded you ; we beat you best '*en fuyant comme les Scythes.*' Montaigne is perfectly right."

Her voice had a sound in it familiar to him, but not familiar enough to be recognisable in her disguise. She baffled all detection, provocative as were the luminous eyes shining on him through her mask, and the laughing lips, like two roses d'amour, which were all that the envious masquerade gave to view.

"I have pursued you to learn who honours me, by forbidding me to flirt. Presumption or not, belle inconnue, I shall construe its interdict as it flatters me most. You recognised me even in domino ; there must be some elective affinity between us!"

“None whatever. I knew you by your eyes, Lord Cecil. What does your legend say?—

Swift, silent, Strathmore’s eyes
Are fathomless and darkly wise;
No wife nor leman sees them smile,
Save at bright steel and statecraft wile;
And when they lighten, foes are ware,
The shrive is short, the shroud is there!”

The words startled him, spoken by the lips of the fair mask in the gay salons of the Hôtel Luilhier; they were the burden of a rhyming chronicle, old as *Piers the Plowman*—a wild, dark legend, still among the cradle-songs of his county, and the chronicles of his own household. It was strange to hear here, in Paris, in the gay revelry of the fête à la Régence, words which he thought had never travelled beyond the woods of White Ladies, which he had never remembered since the days of his boyhood! Who could she be who knew him so well?

“Belle amie,” he said, bending his head to her as they passed under the fragrant aisles of the winter garden, “you flatter me more and more! I must, at least, have some interest for you, since you know by heart my family legends and the look of my eyes! We cannot possibly be strangers——”

“Perhaps we are enemies!” interrupted the mask, the sapphires gleaming here and there on her domino, flashing their azure beams in the light. “The instinct of enmity is quicker than that of friendship or of love, you know, all the world through. How did you bend Prince Michel to your will a few months ago?—by

playing on the subtlest and surest of human passions—revenge!"

"The deuce! is she a witch or a clairvoyante?" thought Strathmore, fairly astounded. The policy he had pursued had been closely kept, if ever the tactics of diplomacy had been so. Who had betrayed them to this Domino Blanc? Who was this Domino Blanc that she knew them? The only woman who could have penetrated their intricacies was that modern De Longueville, the Princesse de Lurine; but the Princess was a brune, an olive-cheeked daughter of Sardinia, and the delicate chin of the mask, which (save the rose lips) was all he could see of his clairvoyante unknown, was white as the skin of the fairest blonde.

"Did you think your state secrets were unknown, Lord Cecil?" she whispered rapidly, her bright eyes dancing with malicious amusement. "Bah! even a swift, silent Strathmore cannot defy a woman, you see. If we are not good for very much in this world, we are good for meddling and for espionage. We are the best detectives in the world, only we can't hold our tongues—we can't keep the secrets when we have learned them. We are so proud of our stolen nuts that we crack them *en plein jour*, instead of keeping them to enjoy in the darkness of night, as you wise men do!"

"Caramba, madame!" laughed Strathmore, looking down into her glittering eyes. "I think it is a popular error that your sex cannot keep a secret; you guard your *own* most admirably for a lifetime, if you

deem it politic; it is only the secrets of others that you betray!"

He had no under-meaning, no hidden innuendo in the satire on her sex, but, for an instant, the bright eyes of the White Domino were clouded and angrily troubled. Perhaps he had struck, without knowing it, on some jarring chord; perhaps she was startled for the moment lest she~~s~~ should have encountered clairvoyance, *en revanche*. Then—she laughed, a gay, fantastic chime of mellow laughter.

"Those who are wise trust us; those who are unwise pique us by drawn veils and forbidden fruits. A woman is never so exasperated as when she is refused —of course it spurs her to her mettle, and into what is bolted and barred from her she will enter by a chink, coûte que coûte. Seal a letter, and we look into it by a corner; shut a door, and we pass through it by the keyhole; tell us a thing is poison, and we taste it, as if it were elixir. No book is so eagerly read as one you forbid us; no secret is so quickly found out as one you taboo to us. If you do not wish me to learn all about the Voltura embroglio, you will tell me, with a good grace, what private instructions D'Arrelio received from Turin; you were with him this morning!"

She whispered it very softly, where they stood beside one of the fountains, falling with measured murmur into its marble basin, and casting its silvery spray high up amongst the scarlet blossoms and the luxuriant foliage of the Eastern creepers. The Voltura em-

broglio! that intricate knot of Anglo-Franco-Italian intrigue, whose slightest threads had never been dropped save in the privacy of the most secret bureaux! Who the deuce could she be, and how could she come by that? Witch, clairvoyante, political intrigante, whatever she might be, he would have defied her to have probed that most secret of diplomatic secrésies, and to know of a visit paid to the envoy of Turin by a side-door and an *escalier dérobé*! This mystic *magicienne* baffled him utterly! She knew his own movements—she knew his own thoughts—she even knew the secret moves of the great chess-players, who had Europe for their chess-board! Strathmore was piqued, excited, provoked; he had never been so impatient in his life; he could almost have forsworn all the courtesies of masquerade, and have torn off by force the envious black mask which hid from his sight the face of his mysterious clairvoyante, and which shrouded every feature, save the sweet, sensuous, mutine mouth, that only made concealment the more cruel!

“The sure way to win whatever you wish, and hear whatever you seek, ma belle, would be to promise removal of your cruel mask as a recompense; none could resist such a bribe, let their probity be what it would!” he whispered her, eagerly.

He by no means intended to confess to the accuracy of her Voltura knowledge; it might be but the clever guesswork of a feminine politician, flung out to entrap him hap-hazard.

"How rash you are!" cried the Domino Blanc, interrupting him mischievously. "I may be wrinkled, haggard, and enamelled, for anything you can tell; I may be a Ninon of seventy, a Du Deffand coquetting in my eightieth year, a female Mirabeau pitted with small-pox and yellow with dyspepsia. Unmasked, I should have lost the charm that only goes with the Unseen. Thank you! I am too wise to part with it!"

"I am anything but rash, and you are anything but wise," persisted Strathmore. "One guesses the perfection of the statue by the little that is unveiled; the beauty of the volume by the grace of the vignette that peeps through the uncut leaves! Enamel, madame, could no more have given the bloom to your lips than their bloom to those blossoms, and those eyes would not be so dangerously eloquent unless they were washed with the morning dew of their dawn!"

"Charming compliments!" laughed the mask, striking him on the arm with the jewelled sticks of her fan. "But you only flatter my beauty to have your curiosity gratified. It is not to see my face, Lord Cecil, but to find out who whispers to you of your tête-à-tête with Arrelio that you would like my mask off. *M. mon diplomate*, I take your flattery at its worth!"

"Then you do injustice to yourself and to me," whispered Strathmore, urgently, tantalised and provoked to the last degree by a woman who knew so much of himself and would let him know nothing of her. "Your hand alone is insignia and type of what

the tout ensemble would be were it only unmasked. Those Titania-like fingers must have face and form to match with them. Do you not think your mask is as cruel as the closest veil of the Odalisque, since, like that, it only shows us enough to make us wistfully dream of all we are denied?"

"Gracefully turned! were it only sincere!" answered the White Domino, her low, musical, mocking laugh echoing softly where they stood by the fountain, where the light of the lamps was shaded by the fantastic ferns and fan-like leaves of the profuse Oriental foliage that drooped around. "But with Lord Cecil Strathmore it is only flattery, adroit and diplomatic, to find out who has the clue to his secret interview with Arrelio! Neither the mask nor the veil are cruelties to you; you care nothing for what they shroud; and as for dreaming of what is denied to you, you would disdain so poetical a weakness, unless the denial involved a state secret; then, indeed, it *might* haunt your sleep a little! Listen, Lord Cecil! I know your diplomacies, see if I know you personally. You are ambitious, but with a singular and lofty ambition, in which wealth has no share. You disdain gold as the *dieu du roture*, and seek power alone. You are cold, and proud of your coldness, as of the polish of steel that has never been dimmed. You prize friendship, but disdain love as the plaything of fools and the dalliance of dotards. You look on life as the clay, and on men as the plaster through whom you, master-craftsman, will fashion the shape that pleases

you without a flaw, ductile and plastic to every turn of your hand. You love finesse, sway, dominance ; you are independent of sympathy ; you are perfectly and presumptuously self-reliant ; you have the profound subtle intellect of the old Italian statesmen ; perhaps you have their swift, dark, relentless passion too ; but, if so, it slumbers—as yet, as it slumbered with them till it was time to strike. You are like the Strathmores of White Ladies, line by line, feature for feature, and with their physiognomy inherit their character. *Now, am I clairvoyante or not ? Tell me !*"

She spoke in a low, sweet whisper, bending towards him with her luminous eyes shining on him through her mask, while the sapphires flashed their azure rays in the light, and the mystical, monotonous music of the fountain murmured on and on, and the scarlet flowers of the Eastern creepers swung against the glittering, snowy folds of her domino. With something of the strange, startled wonder with which Surrey saw his love shadowed out on the Mirour of Gramarye, Strathmore heard his character drawn in the unerring words of the mysterious mask. A moment before he would have sworn that no living creature, save, perhaps, Bertie Erroll, could have known him so well ; and the portraiture, exact to the life in every line, startled him as we may have been startled coming suddenly upon an unseen mirror that gives us back our own reflexion in every trait and in a strong light. He stretched out his hand to her, his grasp involuntarily closing on the folds of the domino.

"Clairvoyante or not, you are an enchantress ! and I must know who has studied me so miraculously before we part. Unmask, ma belle. I cannot let you go unknown. I will not !"

She laughed the laugh sweet as music, that had something menacing and mocking in its soft, subdued carillon.

"But you *must*, by the rules of all masquerades. I am like Eros, I must be adored unseen ; bring light to unveil me, and I shall take wing ! Will you lament as sincerely as Psyche ? Adieu !"

With a swift, sudden movement, ere he could detain her, the white folds slid from his hand, and she had fluttered away, as though she literally took wing like the Eros she spoke of, floating off under the tropical foliage like some rich-plumaged bird, the gold-flowered domino brushing through the dark glossy leaves as she passed. As swiftly Strathmore pursued ; but before it was possible to overtake her, a group of dominoes had surrounded her, and on the arm of one of them she had passed so rapidly out of the Pavillon de Flore, that ere he could follow she was lost in the throng.

Who could she be ? Who could know him so well while she was unknown to him ? Her air, her voice, her eyes were half familiar while yet strange, and the mask might have effectually disguised his best-known friend. Yet, as he recalled those who alone could have spoken thus to him, he rejected them all ; this mysterious clairvoyante could be none of them. The lost White Domino piqued him. Soft voices chal-

lenged him with witty mots, fair maskers kept him talking to them that light, brilliant badinage that women live on, as humming-birds on farina, and bees upon honey; eyes dazzling as hers wooed him tenderly through their masks; but Strathmore was haunted by one woman, to the exclusion of all the rest; he sought her unceasingly through the Luilhiers' salons, but always in vain. The sweet, sensuous mouth, the luminous eyes, the thrilling, musical voice and laugh, which would have had magic in others, were not what piqued him; it was the strange knowledge that she had of himself, the unerring fidelity with which she had sketched traits in his character that he himself even had known but in indistinct shadow till the light of her words had streamed in upon them. Had he believed in clairvoyance he would have sworn to it now!

He sought the White Domino persistently, ceaselessly, through the crowds that filled the rooms for the Duchesse's *fête à la Régence*—sought her always in vain. At last, giving up in provoked despair his bootless chase of the azure sapphires and golden bees, that only flashed on his sight in the distance to perpetually elude his approach, he leant against the doorway of one of the conservatories, where a breeze reached him, cooling the air that was hot with the blaze of the myriad lights, and heavy with the odour of perfumes and flowers; and stood there looking down the long suite of salons, glittering with the moving throng of dominoes, and holding his mask in his hand, so that the light fell full upon the peculiar

Vandyke-like character of his head, rendered the more striking by the dark violet of his masquerade dress and the diamonds that studded it. He was provoked, impatient, interested more than ever he had been in his whole life—save once—and he was annoyed with himself that he had so ~~mismangaged~~ managed the affair as to let the Domino Blanc slip from his hands. He was annoyed with himself, and not less so when, as he stood there, snowy folds swept past him, the jewelled handle of a fan struck his arm, and a soft voice was in his ear :

“*Rêveur!* you look like a portrait of the Old Masters! Are you thinking of the Voltura affair, or of me? You will be foiled with both; Arrelio will not sign, and I shall not unmask! Good night, Strathmore! Perhaps I shall haunt your sleep this morning, as I know a state secret!”

The words were scarce whispered before she had passed him! Again she eluded his detention; again, swift as lightning, he pursued her, this all-mysterious and all-tantalising mask; but destiny was against him. The throng parted them, an Austrian Baroness detained him, the trailing folds of a rose domino entangled him; *she* was perpetually at a distance as he followed her through the salons, which she was then leaving on the arm of a black domino to go to her carriage, the golden bees glittering, the snowy dress fluttering, just far enough off to be provokingly near and provokingly distant, as, detained now by this, now by that, he threaded his way through the interminable length of the salons, ante-chambers, cabinets

de peinture, and reception-rooms in her wake, and passed out into the staircase at the very moment that she was descending its last step! She had a crowd about her, following her as courtiers follow their Queen, and her sapphires were gleaming and her white domino glittering as she crossed in a blaze of light the marble parquet of the magnificent hall of the Hôtel Luilhiers.

“A white domino, powdered with gold bees!—can you tell me whose that is, Arthus?” asked Strathmore, eagerly, where he stretched over the balustrade as Bellus came out of the vestibule, while below, with her masked court about her, she passed on to her carriage.

“A white domino with golden bees!” cried the Vicomte. “Pardieu! you have seen her, then?”

“Seen *her!* Seen whom?”

“Did she take off her mask?” went on Bellus, not heeding the counter-question. “Did you see her face? Did you look at her well? What do you think of her?”

“Her! *Whom?* I ask you who the white domino is. Look—quick! you will catch her before she has passed out of the hall. Whose domino is that?”

“*That?* Nom de Dieu! that is **HERS?**”

“**Hers?** Curse your pronouns! She must have a name! Whose?”

“Peste! Lady Vavasour. You have seen her, then, at last!”

CHAPTER VII.

TWO NIGHT PICTURES—BY WAXLIGHT, AND BY
MOONLIGHT.

MARION LADY VAVASOUR AND VAUX sat before her dressing-room fire (which she had lighted in summer or winter), watching the embers play, nestled in the cozy depths of her luxurious chair, with a novel open in her lap, and her long shining tresses unbound and hanging in as loose, rippled luxuriance as the hair of the *Vénus à la Coquille*. No toilette was so becoming as the azure *négligé* of softest Indian texture, with its profusion of gossamer lace about the arms and bosom, that she wore; no chaussure more bewitching than the slipper, fantastically broidered with gold and pearls, into which the foot she held out to the fire to warm was slipped; no sanctuary for that belle des belles fitter and more enticing than the dressing-room, with its *rose tendre* hangings, its silver swinging lamps, its toilette-table shrouded in lace, its mirrors

framed in Dresden, its jasper tazze filled with jewels, its gemmed vases full of flowers, its crystal carafes of perfumes and bouquets, its thousand things of luxury and grace. Here, perhaps, Marion Lady Vavasour, who had rarest loveliness at all hours, looked her loveliest of all ; and here she sat now, thinking, while the firelight shone on the dazzling whiteness of her skin, on the luminous depths of her eyes, on the shining unbound tresses of her hair, and on the diamond-studded circlet on her fair left hand that was the badge of her allegiance to one lord, and the signet of her title to reign, a Queen of Society and a Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux. Her thoughts might well be sunny ones ; she was in the years of her youth and the height of her beauty ; she had not a caprice she could not carry out, nor a wish she could not gratify. Her world, delirious with her fascination and ductile to her magic, let her place her foot on its neck and rule it as she would ; she was censed with the purple incense of worship wherever she moved, and gave out life and death with her smile and her frown, with a soft whispered word, or a moue boudeuse. From a station of comparative obscurity, when her existence had threatened to pass away in insular monotony and colonial obscurity, her beauty had lifted her to a dazzling rank, and her tact had taught her to grace it, so that none could carp at, but all bowed before her ; so that in a thorough-bred exclusive set she gave the law and made the fashion,

and conquests unnumbered strewed her path “thick as the leaves in Vallambrosa.”

On her first appearance as Lady Vavasour and Vaux, which had been made some six years before this at St. Petersburg, women had murmured at, and society been shy to receive, this exquisite creature, come none knew whence, born from no one knew whom, with whom the world in general conceived that my lord Marquis had made a wretched més-alliance; the Marquis being a man *sans reproche* as far as “blood” went, if upon some other score he was not quite so stainless as might have been. But the world in very brief time gave way before her: with the sceptre of a matchless loveliness, and the skill of a born tactician, she cleared all obstacles, overruled all opponents, bore down all hesitations, silenced all sneers. She created a furore, she became the mode; women might slander her as they would, they could do nothing against her; and in brief time, from her début by finesse, by witchery, by the double right of her own resistless fascination, and the dignity of her lord’s name, Marion Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux was a Power in the world of fashion, and an acknowledged leader in her own spheres of ton, pleasure, and coquetry. “Woman’s wit” can do anything if it be given free run and free scope, and with that indescribable yet priceless quality of her sex she was richly endowed. How richly, you will conceive when I say that, she had so effectually silenced and

bewitched society, that in society (save here and there, where two or three very malicious grandes dames, whom she had outrivalled, were gathered together for spleen, slander, and Souchong) the question of her Origin was never now mooted. It would, indeed, have been as presumptuous to have debated such a question with her, as for the Hours to have asked Aphrodite of her birth when the amber-dropping golden tresses and the snowy shoulders rose up from the white sea-foam. Lady Vavasour was Herself, and was all-sufficient for herself. Her delicate azure veins were her sangre azul, her fair white hands were her seize quartiers, her shining tresses were her bezants d'or, and her luminous eyes her blazonry. Garter King-at-Arms himself, looking on her, would have forgotten heraldry, flung the bare, lifeless skeleton of pedigree to the winds before the living beauty, and allowed that Venus needs no Pursuivant's marshalling.

She sat looking into the dressing-room fire, while the gleam of the wax-lights was warm on her brow, and played in the depths of her dazzling eyes; a pleased smile lingered about her lovely lips, and her fingers idly played with the leaves of her novel—her thoughts were more amusing than its pages. She was thinking over the triumphs of the past night and day; of how she had wooed from the Marquis d'Arrelio, for pure insouciant curiosity, state secrets that honour and prudence alike bade him withhold, but which he was powerless to deny before her magi-

cal witchery ; of how Constantine of Lanaris had followed her from Athens, to lay at her feet the sworn homage of a Prince, and be rewarded with a tap of a fan painted by Watteau ; of the imperial sables Duke Nicholas Tchemidoff had flung down à la Raleigh on a damp spot on the Terrace des Feuillans, where, otherwise, her dainty brodequins would have been set on some moist fallen leaves, as they had strolled there together ; of the pieces of Henri Deux and Rose Berri ware, dearer to him than his life, which that king of connoisseurs, Lord Weiverden, had presented to her, sacrificing his Faïence for the sake of a smile ; of the words which men had whispered to her in the perfumed demielumière of her violet-hung boudoir, while her eyes laughed and lured them softly and resistlessly to their doom ; of all the triumphs of the past twelve hours, since the doors of her hotel in the Place Vendôme had first been opened at two o'clock in the day to her crowding court, to now, when she had quitted the bal masqué of her friend Louise de Luilhier, and was inhaling again in memory the incense on which she lived. For the belle Marquise was a finished coquette, never sated with conquest ; and it was said, in certain circles antagonistic to her own, that neither her coquettries nor her conquests were wholly harmless. But every flower, even the fairest, has its shadow beneath it as it swings in the sunlight !

“ He did not remember ME ! ” thought the Venus

Aphrodite of the rose-hung 'dressing-room, looking with a smile into the flames of the fire, which it was her whim to have even in so warm a night as was this one. "My voice should have told him ; it is a terribly bad compliment ! However, he shall pay for it ! A woman who knows her power can always tax any negligence to her as heavily as she likes. How incomprehensibly silly those women must be who become their lovers' slaves, who hang on their words and seek their tenderness, and make themselves miserable at their infidelities. I cannot understand it ; if there be a thing in the world easier to manage than another, it is a MAN ! Weak, obstinate, vain, wayward, loving what they cannot get, slighting what they hold in their hand, adoring what they have only on an insecure tenure, trampling on anything that lies at their mercy, always capricious to a constant mistress and constant to a capricious—men are all alike ; there is nothing easier to keep in leading-strings when once you know their foibles ! Those swift, silent Strathmores, they are very cold, they say, and love very rarely ; but *when* they love, it must be imperiously, passionately, madly, tout ou rien. I should like to see him roused. Shall I rouse him ? Perhaps ! *He* could not resist me if I chose to wind him round my fingers. I should like to supplant his ambition, to break down his pride, to shatter his coldness, to bow him down to what he defies. Those facile conquests are no honour ; those men who sigh at the first sight of one's eyebrow, and lose their heads at the shadow of a smile ; I am tired

of them—sick of them! Toujours perdrix! And the birds so easily shot! Shall I choose? Yes! No man living could defy *me*—not even Lord Cecil Strathmore!"

And as she thought this last vainglorious but fully-warranted thought, Marion Lady Vavasour, lying back in her fauteuil, with her head resting negligently on her arm, that in its turn rested on the satin cushions, with that grace which was her peculiar charm, as the firelight shone on her loosened hair and the rose-leaf flush of her delicate cheeks, glanced at her own reflexion in a mirror standing near, on whose surface the whole matchless tableau was reproduced with its dainty and brilliant colouring, and smiled—a smile of calm security, of superb triumph. Could she not vanquish, whom and when and where she would?

That night, far across the sea, under the shadow of English woodlands that lay dark and fresh, and still beneath the brooding summer skies, a woman stood within the shelter of a cottage-porch, looking down the forest-lane that stretched into the distance, with the moonbeams falling across its moss-grown road between the boles of the trees, and the silent country lying far beyond hushed, and dim, and shrouded in a white mist. She was young, and she had the light of youth—love—in her eyes as she gazed wistfully into the gloom, vainly seeking to pierce through the dense foliage of the boughs and the darkness of the night,

and listened, thirstily and breathlessly, for a step beloved to break the undisturbed silence. The scarlet folds of a cloak fell off her shoulders, her head was uncovered, and the moon bathed her in its radiance where she stood; the branches above her, as the wind stirred amongst them, shaking silver drops of dew from their moistened leaves on her brow and into her bosom. She loved, and listened for that which she loved ; listened patiently, yet eagerly and long, while the faint summer clouds swept over the dark azure heavens, the stars shining through their mist, and the distant chimes of a church clock from an old grey tower bosomed in the woods tolled out the quarters, one by one, as the hours of the night stole onward.

Suddenly she heard that for which she longed—heard ere other ears could have caught it—a step falling on the moss that covered the forest road, and coming towards her ; then—she sprang forward in the darkness, the dew shaking from her hair, and the tears of a great gladness glancing in her eyes, as she twined her arms close about him whom she met, and clung to him as though no earthly power should sever them.

“ You are come at last ! Ah, if you knew how bitter your absence is, if you knew how I grudge you to the cruel world that robs me so long, so often of you——”

Erroll looked down fondly on her.

“ Lucille ! I am not worth your worship, still less worth the consecration of your life, when I repay it so little, recompense it so ill.”

She laid her hand upon his lips and gazed up into

his eyes, clinging but the more closely to him, and laughing and weeping in her joy :

“Hush, hush ! Pay it ill ? Have I not the highest, best, most precious payment in your love ? *I* care for no other, you know that so well.”

He stroked her hair caressingly, perhaps repentantly (few men can meet the eyes of a wife who loves them purely and faithfully, after a long absence, without some pangs of conscience, without some contrast of the quality of her fidelity and their own), and kissed the lips uplifted to his own ; the love that he read in her eyes, and that trembled in her voice, saddened him, he could not have told why, even whilst he recognised it as something unpurchasable in the world he had quitted, where its strength and its fidelity would have been but words of an unknown tongue, subjects of a jeer, objects of a jest.

“And you have seen none who have supplanted me since we parted ; none of whom I need have jealousy or fear ?” she whispered to him, with a certain tremulous, wistful anxiety—he was her all; she could not be robbed of him !—yet with a fond, sunny smile upon her face as it was raised to his in the faint sheen of the starlight, the smile of a love too deeply true, too truly trustful to harbour a dread that were doubt, a doubt that were disloyalty to the faith it received as to the faith it gave.

He looked down into her eyes, and pressed closer against his own the heart that he knew beat purely, wholly for himself.

“My precious one ! you need be jealous of no

living thing with me. None have twined themselves about my heart, none have rooted themselves into my life as you have done. Have no dread! No rival shall ever supplant you, I swear before God!"

He spoke the oath in all sincerity, in all faith, in all fervour, speaking it as many men have so spoken before him, not dreaming what the day will bring forth, not knowing how fate will make them unwitting perjurors, unconscious renegades to the bond of their word, as they are lured onwards, and driven downwards, powerless, almost one would say blameless, in the hands of chance.

And the woman that nestled in his arms and gazed up into his eyes sighed a low, long sigh of gladness. He was her world; she knew of and needed no other.

Then he loosened her from his embrace, and led her under the drooping branches of the trees that hung stirless in the warm air, into the house hidden in the profuse and tangled foliage. Their steps ceased to fall on the moss, their shadows to slant across the starlit path, their whispered words to stir the silence; the woodland country lay beyond calm and still in the shade of the night, the fleecy clouds drifted slowly now and then across the bright radiance of the moon, the winds moved gently amongst the leaves; in the lattice casements shrouded in the trees the lights died out, and the church chimes struck faintly in the distance their hours one by one. On the hushed earth three angels brooded—Night, and Sleep, and Peace.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE KISMET THAT WAS WRITTEN ON A
MILLEFLEURS-SCENTED NOTE.

" Meurice's, Paris.

" MY DEAR ERROLL,—To keep faith with you, I must tell you that I have seen Lady Vavasour! Rather, to speak more properly, have heard her, for she was masked, and I saw nothing except, what I freely confess to be, as lovely a mouth and chin as the devil ever gave his special aides-de-camp, the daughters of Eve, for a weapon of slaughter and a tool of perdition. I met her at Madame de Luilhier's bal masqué, and she has her full share of Eve's curiosity; for though, to my certain knowledge, I have never seen her before, nor she me, she informed me of everything about myself, and a little more besides! She repeated one of the old White Ladies chronicles —where could she get hold of it?—and was up to some diplomatic tricks, whose juggling we all thought

had been done strictly *in petto*. I suppose the Nazarenes, who lie in the lap of the titled Dalilah, let her coax their secrets out of them. The ass that Samson in all ages ought to smite is Himself ! You will think her divine, I dare say ; fascinating I can very well believe that she is, by the wiles she tried upon me to-night ; and she's gifted with the sex's true genius for tantalising. I like nothing I have heard of her, and I should say it is particularly lucky the Marquis is of elastic conjugal principles ! I never remember seeing him, do you ? I don't envy him his wife, though I admit she is half a sorceress, and has a very pretty mouth ; but it is a mouth that would whisper too many infidelities to please me, were I *he* ! What the deuce are you doing with yourself ? Carlton tells me you said 'you were going out of town—*c'était tout*' Out of town in the middle of the season ! You surely are not turning pastoral, and getting *entêté* of provinciality ? The Beau Sabreur a Strephon ! What a vision ! I dare say a woman's at the bottom of it ; but Aspasia was always your game, not Phillis, except, indeed, with that mysterious White Ladies inamorata, whom you wouldn't be chaffed about. But it can't be she, because *that* love's twelve months' old now to my knowledge, and must have been rococo long ago. I will pique Lady Millicent till she badgers you out of your secret. Good night, old fellow. I shall be heartily glad to see you again. When will it be ? Can't you run over here ? I expect I shall get the French Derby, though Lawton's confounded love of

a close finish lost me the English one. The betting's quite steady here on Maréchale, always five to one. I shall start him for the St. Leger, and send him over to Maldon to train through August and September. Nesselrode's a good second. They don't offer freely at all on Tambour, and I half think he'll be scratched. The Abbey's at your service, of course, as it always is, to fill as you like for the First. You will oblige me very much by keeping the old place open, and knocking over the birds, whether I come or not.

“Yours as ever,

“CECIL STRATHMORE.”

Strathmore, having written those last words as the morning sun streamed in through the persiennes of his bedchamber, addressed his letter to Major Erroll, 19A, Albermarle-street, London (where that debt-laden Sabreur had a suite of rooms, dainty and luxurious enough to domicile Lady Millicent), and lying back in his chair, stirred the chocolate Diaz had placed at his elbow, and sat smoking, while the smooth Albanian moved noiselessly about, laying out the clothes that might be needed through the day, polishing an eye-glass, rubbing up a diamond, refilling a bouquet-bottle, or performing some other office of valetdom. Carelessly and cavalierly as he had dismissed the Domino Blanc in the letter he had just been writing, the tantalising mystery of the night before was not so easily to be dismissed from his memory.

Lady Vavasour !

For once Strathmore's keen penetration and diplomatist acumen were baffled and at fault ; he could fathom neither the means nor the motive of the dazzling Peeress's interest in, and attack upon him. How could a woman, whom he had perpetually missed, and never met during the seven years that she had sparkled through society, know him, as he would have taken his oath his eldest friend could not do, and photograph his character with a realistic accuracy that he himself, limning it from analysis, could barely have attained ?

The belle Marquise lying back in her fauteuil, gazing dreamily and nonchalantly at herself in the mirror, with her shining hair falling over her arm, and a smile of superb consciousness on her rich curling lips, might have exercised a mesmeric power of will the night before, so persistently had she haunted him from the time that he saw the last flutter of the snowy folds of her domino. Is there any electro-biology so potent as beauty ?

A vague prejudice had associated Lady Vavasour in his eyes with a dangerous and disagreeable aroma ; he had mistrusted, without knowing her, this woman who fooled fools at her will ; she had been a més-alliance, and he abhorred mésalliances ; she was a Creole, and he detested Creoles ; she was a coquette, and he was always impatient of coquettes. If Strathmore had ever wasted his hours in imagining an ideal mistress (which he most assuredly never did), his

ideal would have, probably, clothed itself in some form, pure, stainless, lofty, of a soilless honour, and a grave and glorious grace, such as Hypatia, when the sunlight of Hellas fell on her white Ionic robes, and her proud eyes glanced over the assembled multitudes. This malicious mask, this tantalising clairvoyante, was certainly of an order its direct antipodes ! But despite all that, perhaps because of it, Lady Vavasour, seen yet unseen, unknown yet knowing so much, haunted him, piqued him, usurped his thoughts ; and when a woman does that, what use is it for any man to send her to the deuce, to consign her to the devil ? Heaven knows, not one whit ! Anathema Maranatha only incenses the sorceress, and the more she is exorcised the more she persists.

To dismiss her troublesome memory, he took up one out of a pile of letters Diaz had placed on a salver beside him. It was a delicate cream-coloured Millefleurs-scented billet, fragrant with the odour of the boudoir, breathing of a buhl writing-case, and a gemmed penholder, and white jewelled fingers ; it was only a note of invitation, pressingly worded, and signed Blanche de Ruelle-Courances, asking him to join the party gathered at her château of Vernonçaux, now that Paris was growing empty and detestable, and the country and the vine-shadows were à la mode. The Comtesse de Ruelle was a charming leader of his own set, English by birth and tint, Parisienne by marriage and habit ; there was no more agreeable place in Europe to visit at than Vernon-

çœaux, and she always had about her as amusing and as *chic* a circle as the fashion of the two nations afforded. He read the note; not inclined to accept the invitation, but intending to go across the Kohl, in common with most other European Dips and décorés, to the pet Bad of ministers and martingales, congresses and *coups de bonheur*, Chevaliers of the order of honour and Chevaliers of the order of industry, king-like Greeks and Greek-like kings. His weighing of the merits of Baden *v.* Vernonçœaux, and fifty other places open to him, was interrupted by Diaz approaching him from the ante-room :

“ M. le Comte de Valdor demande si milord est visible ?”

Strathmore looked up, setting down his chocolate :

“ To him—oh yes ! Show M. le Comte up here, if he have no objection.”

The Albanian withdrew (Diaz was soft, sleek, noiseless as a panthère, and obeyed implicity—four inestimable qualities in a valet, a wife, or a spy !), and, in a few minutes, ushered Valdor in ; a very young man, not more than four or five-and-twenty, slight, graceful, animated, delicately made, the beau-ideal, as he was the descendant, of those who turned back their scented ruffles, and shook the powder from their perfumed locks, as they went out with a mot on their lips to the fatal *charette* while the tocsin sounded.

“ Valdor, très cher, forgive my receiving you *en négligé*,” laughed Strathmore. “ We don’t stand on

ceremony with one another. I'm later than usual, and you are earlier. It isn't twelve, is it?"

Valdor looked at his little jewelled watch, the size of a fifty-centième, and answered a trifle *à tort et à travers* as he sank into a dormeuse, and played with *Galignani*.

"If you come out at noon like this, Valdor, you'll soon lose your reputation; you'll tan your skin, disenchant your lady worshippers, and sink among the ordinary herd, who are deep in business before we've had our coffee, and trade in their coupons before we've thought of our valets," laughed Strathmore, noticing his unusual absence of manner, for Valdor was generally the most insouciant of *blondins*, and boasted that he never reflected but on two subjects—the fit of his gloves, and the temperature of his eau-de-Cologne bath.

Valdor laughed too, and stroked his moustaches with a hand as small and as delicate as that which the White Domino could boast.

"It *is* horribly early; friends are great bores in the morning; nobody's mot's good till the luncheon wine has washed it; indeed, I don't think a decent thing's ever said before dinner. I'm sure Horace himself was prosy before he had sat down to the *cœna*; wit must have starved of famine on a date! I owe you fifty excuses, Strathmore, for intruding so soon, but—I wanted to see you alone."

"I am most happy to see you, my dear fellow. If you are going to be unamusing, it's the prerogative

of friendship to prose, as of marriage to bore one you know ; every virtuous thing is dull ; a preacher and a prig from time immemorial ! ” said Strathmore, playing with the dainty Millefleurs-scented note. “ What’s the matter, Valdor—anything ? Are you ruining yourself for Viola Vé, like Caderousse ? Has Nesselrode gone lame ? Has some *brave du roture* been copying your liveries, or has some ugly Serene Princess fallen in love with you, and left you vacillating between the horrors and the honours of the liaison ? What is it, eh ? ”

“ Only this—once for all, I’m ashamed to say I must keep in your debt a little longer— ”

“ That all ! ” cried Strathmore, stopping him before he could finish the sentence. “ My dear fellow ! never trouble your head about such a trifle ; I had forgotten it, I assure you ; oblige me by doing the same.”

Valdor shook his head, the colour in his face deepening, as he tossed the *Galignani* with the nervous gesture of a man embarrassed and mortified :

“ I can’t forget so easily ; I would not if I could. You are too generous, Strathmore ; you lend to men who have nothing. I never dreamt I should be unable to pay you ; I made sure that by this time —but Lascases refuses to renew my bill ; I cannot get money anywhere just yet, and— ”

Strathmore stopped him with a gesture, and stretched out his hand ; he liked young Valdor, and

his own wealth, as I have said, he held in superb disdain, save in so far as it conduced to Power. He gave freely and royally ; evil there might be in his nature, but not a touch of meanness ; at that time he would have succoured his darkest foe from his purse ; the virtues, as the errors of this man, were all naturally in extreme ; petty things were not alone beneath him, but impossible to him.

“ You would get into Lascases’s debt to get out of mine ? For shame ! Trust your friend rather than that beggarly Jew, surely ! You will repay it when you can, that I am certain of ; meantime, give me your honour you will never renew the subject unless I do. It was a trifling affair, and you were most welcome to it ! ”

As he spoke, the generous smile, which gave much of sweetness to his face, came on it, softening what was dark, relaxing what was cold ; and Valdor, as his hand closed on Strathmore’s, saw all that was best, all that was most attractive, in a nature that was an enigma in much even to itself. He spoke a few hurried words of thanks ; he, a bel esprit of the salons and the circles, was now at a loss for speech—now that he *felt* ; and Strathmore stopped him once more.

“ Not a syllable more about it ! If ever the time come that I have to ask *you* to do anything, I know you will do it for me—*c'est assez*. Are you going to Vernonçeaux this year, Valdor ? ”

He spoke carelessly, laughingly, to cover whatever

embarrassment the other might feel in accepting his generosity ; he little foresaw what the service would be that he would call on his debtor to render him.

“ You are ? Well ! there isn’t a more charming châtelaine than Blanche anywhere. She invites me, but I shall go to Baden after the race week,” went on Strathmore, brushing a fly off the rose Cashmere sleeve of his dressing-gown. “ I shall meet Arrelio there, and you get a man’s meaning out of him in chit-chat as you never do in a conference. If congresses were held *en petit comité*, with a supper worthy Carême, they might come to something, instead of ending, as they always do now, in cobwebs and in moonshine. Why do the English always get cheated and fooled in a European congress, I wonder ? Not because they *can’t* lie, it is the national trade. Because they lie too much and too barefacedly, I think ; and no *gobemouche* is ever tricked into even suspecting them of—the truth ! A wise man never lies ; I don’t mean because he’s moral, but because he’s judicious : ‘ On peut être plus fin qu’un autre, mais pas plus fin que tous les autres.’ Somebody always finds out a falsehood, and, once found out, your credit’s gone ! I say, Valdor, do you know my compatriote, Lady Vavasour ? ”

“ Lady Vavasour ? Bon Dieu ! I think I do ! What a cold-blooded question to ask anybody in that indifferent way ! Who doesn’t know her, rather ? ”

“ I don’t. What sort of woman is she ? ”

"Peste, mon cher, you ask a folio. I couldn't tell you. She is divine——!"

"Divine? Well! 'a woman *is* a dish for the gods if the devil dress her not,' Shakspeare says; but I think the devil generally has the dressing, and serves up sauce with it so very piquante that it's all but poison; it's a dish like mushrooms, dainty but dangerous; with the beau sexe as with the fungi, it's fifty to ten one lights on a false one, and pays penalty for one's appetite! Is she a malicious woman, your divinity?"

"Malicious? No! Malice is for *passées* women, pinched, sallow, and hungrily jealous; for dowagers who nod their wigs over whist and their neighbours' character; for *vielles filles* who vacillate between sacraments and scandals! Malice is a vinegar thing that belongs to a 'certain age!'—it has nothing to do with her. She's a little tantalising, if you like——"

"Distinction without a difference! I thought she was! And a coquette?"

"To the last extent!"

Strathmore laughed:

"To the *last*! I dare say!—when women once pass the boundary line they generally clear the ramparts. I suppose the Marquis gives the latitude he takes—just, at any rate. We're not often so on those points; we take an ell, but we don't give an inch. That's the beauty of vesting our honour in our wives; it's so much easier to forbid and dragonise another than ourselves! What a droll thing, by the way, it is, that

an Englishwoman piques herself on being THOUGHT faithful to her husband, and a Frenchwoman on being thought *unfaithful*; their theory's different, but their practice comes to much the same thing!"

"They're like schismatics in the Churches, they split in semblance and on a straw's point, but, *sous les cartes*, agree to persecute and agree to dupe! As for Lord Vavasour, he's a detestable gourmand, invents sauces, bores you horribly, and has but one virtue—a great conjugal one!—he never interferes with his wife! He's a semi-sovereign with a lot of parasites, a *mauvais sujet* with a *ton de garnison*, and just brains enough to be vicious without enough to be entertaining."

"A very general case, my dear fellow! Vice is very common, and wit is very scarce; fifty men make mischief to one that makes mots. We can fill our cells with convicts, but not our clubs with *causeurs*. I wonder governments don't tax good talk; it's quite a luxury, and they might add *de luxe*, since so many go without it all their lives, in blessed ignorance of even what it is! Where does your belle Marquise go this year? I suppose you know all her movements? She must be leaving now."

"Peste! don't you know? I thought you were asked to Vernonçeaux?"

"Well! if I be, what has that——"

"To do with it? She is going there too. She leaves Paris to-day."

"*There?*" The word had a dash of eagerness in

it, different to the uninterested, careless tone with which Strathmore had asked all his other questions.

"Yes. She and Madame de Ruelle are sworn allies ; they are constantly together. Go there and you'll see her. Do, Strathmore ; parole d'honneur she is worth the trouble. She is exquisite, and for you, you icicle, she can't be dangerous."

"Dangerous !" said Strathmore, with his most contemptuous sneer. "Thank God, no woman was ever yet dangerous to me ; a man must be a fool indeed who is snared by the ready-made wiles of a coquette."

"Antony was no fool."

"No, but he was a madman, and that comes to the same thing ; besides, Antony must have had very extraordinary tastes altogether, to be in love with a woman forty years old, and as brown as a berry."

"Yes," said Valdor, pathetically, "I do wish, for his credit, Cleopatra had been half her years, and a shade or two fairer. Actium would have been very poetic then."

"Poetic ? Pitiable, if you like, as it is now. I say, Valdor—to go to a better theme—those steel-greys of Lee Vivian's went for nothing at the sale yesterday ; they were splendid animals, and the pigeon-blue Arab mare was knocked down for five thousand francs ! The wines will be worth bidding for, too ; he had some of the best comet-hock in Paris. Poor fellow ! one drinks his wines at his table one month, and discusses them in a catalogue

the next. *Ars longa, vita brevis!*—one's connoisseurship survives one's friendship ; Orestes must die, and Iolaüs must dine ! Damon must go to the dogs, and Pythias must season his dishes ! Because our brother's in the Cemetery, that's no reason why we should neglect our Cayenne !”

With which remark upon friendship, which was with him as much serious as satirical (since Strathmore was an egotist by principle and profession, habit and nature, and had never had any death touch him as he had never had any life wound round him), he began to discuss the news of the day with his guest, and it was not till Valdor had left that he took up the letter from Vernonçeaux again, and drew a sheet of paper to him to answer it now,—by an acceptance.

In the little Millefleurs-scented billet lay, unknown to its writer as to him, the turning-point of his life. God help us! what avail are experience, prescience, prudence, wisdom, in this world, when at every chance step the silliest trifle, the most common-place meeting, an invitation to dinner, a turn down the wrong street, the dropping of a glove, the delay of a train, the introduction to an unnoticed stranger, will fling down every precaution, and build a fate for us of which we never dream ? Of what avail for us to erect our sand-castle when every chance blast of air may blow it into nothing, and drift another into form that we have no power to move ? Life hinges upon hazard, and at every turn wisdom is mocked by it,

and energy swept aside by it, as the battled dykes are worn away, and the granite walls beaten down, by the fickle ocean waves, which, never two hours together alike, never two instants without restless motion, are yet as changeless as they are capricious, as omnipotent as they are fickle, as cruel as they are countless! Men and mariners may build their bulwarks, but hazard and the sea will overthrow and wear away both alike at their will—their wild and unreined will, which no foresight can foresee, no strength can bridle.

Was it not the mere choice between the saddle and the barouche that day when Ferdinand d'Orléans flung down on second thoughts his riding-whip upon the console at the Tuilleries, and ordered his carriage instead of his horse, that cost himself his life, his son a throne, the Bourbon blood their royalty, and France for long years her progress and her peace? Had he taken up the whip instead of laying it aside, he might be living to-day with the sceptre in his hand, and the Bee, crushed beneath his foot, powerless to sting to the core of the Lily. Of all strange things in human life, there is none stranger than the dominance of Chance.

CHAPTER IX.

THE WARNING OF THE SCARLET CAMELLIAS.

WHERE the grey pointed towers of the Château of Vernonçaux rose above the woods among the vine-shadows of Lorraine, the air seemed still perfumed with the amber, still echoing with the madrigals of Gentil-Bernard, still rustling with the sweep of robes à la Pompadour, still filled with the mots of *abbés galants*, and the laughter of pretty pagans of a century ago. For Vernonçaux was near to Lunéville —the Lunéville of Stanislas, of Voltaire, of la belle Boufflers, the *replica* of Versailles, the pleasant exile of forbidden wit, the Lunéville of a myriad memories!

Vernonçaux stood as secluded in its forest as the castle of the Sleeping Beauty—so tranquil and so shaded, that the gay sinners of Lunéville might have been chained there in enchanted slumber, like the

Moorish court under the marble pavements of the Alhambra ; but if, without, there was a sylvan solitude, broken but by the song of the vintagers or the creak of the oxen-drawn waggon, within, when the Comtesse de Ruelle went there for the summer months with a choice selection from her ultra-exclusive Paris set, there were as much luxury, wit, and refined revelry as ever the Marquise de Boufflers, a hundred years before, had presided over at the little palace of Lunéville.

No sound broke the silence, save the ring of his horse's feet, as Strathmore drove the mail phaeton that had been sent to meet him through the park to Vernonçaux, on his way to the visit for which he had abandoned Baden. There was not a thing in sight but the rich country beyond and the dense forest-growth about him, until, as a break in the wood brought into view the grey façade of the building, a riding party rode into the court-yard by opposite gates to those by which he would enter, looking like some court cavalcade of Watteau, some hunting group of Wouverman's, and breaking suddenly in with life, and colouring, and motion on the solitude of the landscape, as they were thrown out in strong relief against the ivy-hung walls of the château. "I'm in time for dinner," he thought, noticing how well one of the women rode who was teasing her horse with sharp strokes of her whip, and making him rear and swerve, before she sprang from the saddle : the distance was too far for him to make out

who she was, and, as he dropped his eye-glass, he wished for a lorgnon.

The saddle-horses were being led off by their grooms, and the first dressing-bell had just rung when he drove into the court-yard. At the moment of his arrival all the world was dressing, and Strathmore, as he went straight to his room, passing along the Galerie des Dames, consecrated from time immemorial to the repose of the beau sexe, heard a handsome *brune* coming out of one of the rooms say to another lady's-maid, apparently her sub-lieutenant in office, “*Va vite chercher les camellias roses, dans les serres chaudes. Madame désire des fleurs naturelles, c'est sa whim comme disent les Anglais. Ah ma foi!—qu'elle a des caprices, Miladi Vavasour!*”

This name was the first he heard at Vernonçaux ! As he heard it, Strathmore, the last man in the world who was ever troubled by regrets or haunted by forebodings, who ever descended to the weakness of vacillation, or paid himself so ill a compliment as to imagine any step he took, however great, however trivial, could by any possibility be *unwisely* taken, wished for the moment, on an impulse he could not have explained, that he had gone to Baden instead, and left the Mask unmasked, the White Domino unknown. It was the first time a woman had ever influenced him, and he resented the influence. His prejudice against Lady Vavasour came back in full force as he heard her maid order the fresh scarlet

camellias ! The flowers were harmless, surely, and yet (perhaps it was association with *La Dame aux Camellias !*) with them she reassumed a dangerous aspect, as of a sorceress unscrupulous in her spells, a coquette merciless in her wiles, a woman who lived upon vanity and adored but herself, a creature like the Japan lilac, lovely to look on, but to those who lingered near, who touched or who played with her, certain destruction. By what force of argument he could not have told—trifles play the deuce with us, oddly sometimes, but by some irrepressible instinct, all his old dislike and mistrust of Lady Vavasour came back with that innocent and luckless hothouse order.

“Who are here, Diaz—do you know ?” he asked the Albanian, as he dressed after his bath and a cup of coffee.

The imitable *modus operandi* of that priceless person had mastered the whole visiting-list of Vernonçaux, though he had, on the whole, but about three minutes to himself for the process.

“Marquis and Marchioness of Vavasour, please your lordship,” began Diaz.

“A stupid pigeon and a clever snarer!” thought Strathmore, as he held out his wrist to have his sleeve-links fastened.

“Lady George Dashwood and her sister——”

“Pretty precisions, naughty as Messalina, who go to church, like Marguerite, to meditate on Faust !” reflected Strathmore.

"My Lord Viscount Blocquehedd and M. de Croquis."

"One a fool, who writes slangy, burlesqued travels, that sell because hundreds in coroneted carriages drive up to his publisher's doors to get a copy in public and enjoy a laugh in private ; and the other, a magnificent fellow, who'd have been fit company for Scipio at Linternum, but who can't send a sheet of copy to press without a 'caution' and a chance of Cayenne," thought Strathmore, perfuming his beard.

"Lady Fitzeden, my lord," pursued Diaz.

"Who gives ball-vouchers for other people's 'unimpeachability,' but couldn't on oath give one for her own ! " reflected his master.

"Monsignore Villaflôr and M. l'Abbé de Verdreuil."

"A brace of priests, who have intrigues and absolutions in their hands, make penitents and shrive them, hide the *roué* under the *rochet*, and Cupid in the confessional. I know the race," thought Strathmore.

"M. le Vicomte de Clermont, Lord Arthur Legard, Colonel Dormer, and M. de la Rennecourt," pursued Diaz, in profound ignorance of his master's mental commentary.

"Very good fellows all of them ; dress better than they talk, shoot with truer aim than they think, bore one rather at everything but billiards, and bestow more on their hair than on the brains underneath it, *comme il faut* but common-place," said Strathmore to

himself, with the contempt of a clever man for men who are only educated, of an ambitious man for men who are only *à la mode*, of a man who but makes society his stepping-stone for men who never see or soar beyond it.

"Madame de Saint-Claire, H.S.H. Hélène of Mechlin, and Lord and Lady Beaudesert, are here too, my lord," added the Albanian, closing the list. "I think that is all—all I have heard of at present, at least."

"A bas-bleu as mathematical and material as Madame du Châtelet, a babyish blonde with a mushroom royalty and a nursery lisp; a dashing brunette who smokes cigarettes and has led the Pytchley. Well, there will be change, at any rate. Blanche hasn't sorted her guests as she sorts her embroidery silks, in shades that suit; however, good contrasts are effective sometimes. There's nobody I don't know, except the priests and the Vavasours. That's a bore; new acquaintances are much pleasanter than familiar ones; the varnish is fresh, and the gilding is bright, and the polish is smooth, and you only just touch the surface with friends an hour old. Nothing wears so badly, and stands the microscope so ill as Humanity. I suppose because we are all sham to one another, and *les hommes se haisent naturellement*; so the electro comes off, and the hatred comes out, when we've been some time together," thought Strathmore, as he left his room to go to the drawing-rooms. No one was yet down when he was ushered

into the salons, and he threw himself on a dormouse with his back to a window opening on the terrace, playing idly with the snowy curls of a little lion-dog, who, recognising him, leapt on his knee, shaking its silver bells in a joyous welcome. Strathmore did not care about animals ; in truth, I don't think he cared much about anything except—himself ! Not that he was an egotist in any petty sense of the word ; he would have shrouded no man's light, profited at no man's cost, taken no man's right, but he was self-sustained and self-absorbed ; keen personal ambitions were dominant in him, pure personal interests alone occupied him, and the instincts and weaknesses—kindlier if you like, but more general and less viril of most men—had no part in him. He was kind to a dog, for instance, because it was helpless, and he would have disdained to be otherwise ; but to care for a dog's fidelity, to regret a dog's death as he had known Erroll do, were utterly incomprehensible to him.

He sat there some few moments listlessly twisting the ear of the Maltese, while the clock on the console near gently ticked away the time, and pointed to a quarter to nine ; he did not hear a step approach towards the back of his chair from the terrace behind, he did not turn and see a figure that stood just within the window betwixt him and the faint evening light.

“ Bon jour, Lord Cecil ! Are you meditating on the Gitâna prophecy, or on the Domino Blanc—

which? Or is the Voltura affair absorbing you, pray, to the utter exclusion of both?"

That light, *méchante* voice that had mocked him from the mask struck on his ear like the gay, sudden chime of some silvery bell, and for once in his life Strathmore started! As he rose and swung round, the night under the Czeschen limes came back swiftly and vividly to his memory;—how had that voice failed to recal it before?

With the scarlet coronal of flowers on her lovely amber hair, and the light of a sunny laughter beaming in her eyes; framed between the gossamer lace and broidered azure silk of the curtain draperies; a form bright and brilliant and richly coloured as any picture of Watteau's, thrown out against the purple haze of the air, and the dark shadows of evening that were veiling the landscape beyond; there stood the blonde aux yeux noirs of the Vigil of St. John, the White Domino of the *fête à la Régence*—Marion Marchioness of Vavasour! Strangely enough, he had never even by a random thought connected the two as one. Involuntarily, unwittingly, he stood a moment dazzled and surprised, looking at the delicate and glittering picture that was before him, painted in all its dainty colouring on the sombre canvas of the night; and she laughed softly to herself,—for one brief instant she had startled him from his self-possession. She guessed rightly, that no woman before her had ever boasted so much.

Then Strathmore bent to her with the soft and

stately courtesy for which his race of steel had ever been famed—the velvet glove that they habitually wore over their gauntlets of mail.

“I merit a worse fate than the Gitâna predicted me, for my blindness in not recognising the veiled picture by its eyes, in not knowing no two voices could have a music so rare! May I ask to be forgiven, though I can never forgive myself?”

She smiled as she gave him her hand :

“ You may. You rendered me too daring and too generous a service, Lord Cecil, for me not to forgive you weightier offences than that. I am your debtor for a heavy debt—the debt of my life saved! Believe me, I am very grateful.”

The words were few and simple; a young girl out of her convent could not have spoken more earnestly and touchingly than the woman of the world; where more florid, profuse, eloquently-studied words would have been set aside by him as the conventional utterances of necessity, these charmed and won him, these rang on his ear with the accent of truth.

“ To secure so high a price as your gratitude most men would have perilled much more than I did,” he answered her. “ But I had not then the incentive that would tempt the world to any madness at Lady Vavasour’s bidding. I had not seen what I rescued, I did not know whom I served!”

She looked up at him from under her black silken lashes as she sank into the chair he wheeled to her, and smiled.

“ You compliment charmingly, Lord Cecil (you remember, I suppose, that I said I liked bon-bons), but then, how much is true? You are a diplomatist; it is your habit to speak suavely and mean nothing, it is the *spécialité* that will get you the Garter and give you an Earldom.”

“ Lady Vavasour—by everything I have heard of her—can surely never mistrust her own power to convert the most sceptical, and do with all men what she would ?”

Her attitude, as she sank down into the chair, had all the soft Odalisque-like grace with which he had first seen her lying amongst her cushions on the bench of the Bohemian boat ; and he confessed to himself that this matchless and dazzling beauty, at once poetic and voluptuous, at once gifted with the loveliness of the sérail, and the tournure of the salons, might well play with men, and make their madness at its will.

“ Ah ! ” she laughed—her airy, silvery laugh !—“ but I do not profess to deal with people who desire age and despise love ; they are not in my experience, or my category. I shall be a long while before I credit any compliment from you, mon ami. Did I not show you how well I knew your character at the *bal masqué*? Was it not sketched, now, as accurately, as any one of La Bruyère’s ? ”

“ It was, though it was not drawn altogether *en beau*. Is was so accurate that it flattered me even by its unflattering points, since it showed that I must

have been a subject of interest and of study to my unerring clairvoyante."

A momentary blush tinged her cheek, making her loveliness lovelier, and not escaping Strathmore, though he knew how *grandes dames* can blush, as they can weep at their will, when they need it to embellish their beauty, too well to be much honoured by it. She looked at him with the same glance that had flashed through her mask.

"Not at all! You are much too vain! I only wanted to puzzle you. If my shafts hit home, it was chance, not effort. Hearsay and penetration made my clairvoyance, as they make all. You were no stranger to me by name. I have heard plenty of you from others, though we had never happened to meet till that night in Bohemia. Come! tell me the truth. Do you not think it a terrible escapade to have travelled alone, at night, in that *inconséquent* manner, with only my maid?"

"I think it a '*caprice d'une belle dame*,' which became her far better than the common-place and the conventional, which have nothing in common with her," smiled Strathmore. And for once he paid a compliment that was sincerely meant! "But why did you so cruelly refuse me your name, and condemn me to pursue '*un ombre, un rêve, un rien*,' in seeking to see again the phantom which had flashed on me, when, had I but known *whom* I sought, all Europe would have guided me to its *idol*?"

"Very gracefully asked, indeed!" said Lady Vavasour, with a sign of her fan, made eloquent in her hand, as in the hand of a Gaditâna of Cadiz. "But, first of all, you never pursued the phantom at all, mon ami. You don't do those things! I wasn't a state secret, and I didn't carry despatches: *seguitur*, you were courteous to me while we were together because you were well bred, and I was a woman; but you never thought twice about me after we parted, except just that night, when I left you behind to smoke and sleep under the pines, when, perhaps, you said to yourself, 'Blonde with dark eyes—unusual! Travelling alone, too—very odd!' and then dismissed me to think of Prince Michel! Secondly, I refused you my name, because it was my whim to travel incognita; and down the river I dispensed with even my courier. I am as capricious as the winds, you know, and, like the winds, never change my caprices for any one's will!"

Before he could answer her the door of the salon was thrown open, and several people entered—his hostess among others, with that courtly, velvet-shod churchman, Monsignore Villaflôr. Strathmore had to rise, and his place was taken by the priest, who was a courtier, a connoisseur, and a *courieur des ruelles*. The rooms filled; dinner was announced and served as the little chimes of the clock rang nine, and to Strathmore's lot fell Lady George Dashwood, whose soft platitudes had never seemed more wearisome to him than to-night, when they discoursed of

chamber-music, old china, Maltese dogs, new fashions, Elzevir editions, and altar-screens, in the same unvarying and perfectly-bred monotone, which had much the same effect as if a humble-bee had been perpetually humming in the flowers of the épergne before him. At some distance from him—too great for any conversation with her—sat Lady Vavasour; and while keeping up his recitative with Lady George, Strathmore could not choose but look at her, could not choose but think of her—this woman who had been first so strangely thrown in his way, against whom he still felt an unconquerably stubborn prejudice, yet who exercised over him, when he was with her, a necromancy of air, of glance, of tone, that surprised him, incensed him, and yet beguiled him. Had he foreseen his future, he would have flung aside every thought of this bright, brilliant beauty, as he had flung aside her broidered handkerchief into the bosom of the Czeschen peasant girl in Prague; but—could we foresee one step before another, would the lives of any one of us be blasted, blundered, full of bitterness, and of evil, as they are? Is not the misery of every life due to the band that is bound fast on our eyes, which the wisest can do little to lift, which makes us feel our way blindly, uncertainly, erringly, stumbling at every step; which is never lifted, save when our faces are turned backwards, and we are bidden to look behind us at the land that we have quitted, which is sown

thick with graves ; and at the gates that are closed upon us, on which is written “Too Late” ?

Amidst the hum of conversation, the bouquet of the wines, the fragrance of the exotics, the numberless murmurs of “Sauterne, monsieur ?”—“Château Yquem ?”—“Suprême de Volaille ?”—“Macedoine d’Abricots ?”—“Beignets d’Annanas ?” Strathmore throughout dinner let his thoughts be usurped by the dazzling face, with its amber hair drawn slightly back from the delicate temples, in masses and ripples of yellow gold, which was but tantalisingly visible to him through the clusters of gorgeous flowers, and behind the form of an alabaster Ariadne that intervened between her and himself. Is there any separation more exasperating than the length of a dinner-table ? I don’t believe the Hellespont was half so provoking ! Leander could cross *that* if Hero didn’t mind receiving him *au naturelle* ; but what man, pray, can move from his place at a dinner-party ? He must say with Claude Frollo, “*Anakthe !*” submit, and sit where he’s put !

Strathmore found the dinner an interminable bore, and felt his prejudice giving way ; his judgment in no way swerved from his settled conviction that Lady Vavasour was vain, spoiled, dangerous, and a consummate coquette, bent upon conquest, and not over-careful of her character—a glance told him that ; but the rich, glad, luxuriant music that he had heard from her lips under the lindens by the river-side, now

sweet as a bird's carol, now sad as a miserere, seemed to ring in his ear again, and he caught himself thinking a poetic sentimentalism worthy of the Sabreur—that she must have some of that music in her soul! Against the White Domino, the malicious Mask, he would have been prepared and steeled; the bright Odalisque of the Moldau, the songstress of the Spring night, took him unawares, and disarmed him.

As the women rose at length and swept out of the great banqueting-hall, where Guises had feasted Valois, she had to pass his chair, the lace of her dress brushing his shoulder, the subtle fragrance of her hair wafted to him like the odour of some hothouse flower. As she did so, a bracelet of cameo dropped from her arm (*really* dropped, she was too highly finished a coquette to need any such vulgar and common-place ruses); and as Strathmore bent for it and fastened it again on her arm, he noticed how snow-white and polished the skin was, like the skin of the unguent-loving and delicate Greeks, and confessed to himself that the smile on those sweet, laughing lips was the loveliest a woman ever had at command.

“*Merci!* We leave you, à *l'Anglais*, to olives and repose, politics and cigarettes, solitude and slander. How you will pick our beauty to pieces and legislate for the nations! *Adieu!*” she whispered, as she passed onward.

“By George! they did not overrate her; and that fool is her husband! Faugh! it is Caliban

wedded to Miranda!" thought Strathmore, as he poured some Johannisberg into his glass, looking across at the Marquis of Vavasour. The epithet and the comparison were both somewhat overstrained, it must be admitted; but there are very few men, I think, who, admiring a beautiful woman, are not disposed to think her lord and master a contemptible fellow, and feel very much towards him as you may have felt on a still grey day in September, lounging along by the sunken fence of some splendid preserves of which you have not the *entrée*, looking at the cover and hearing the whirr of the birds, towards the owner, whoever he be, for whom the game's set apart. And when M. le Mari is a muff, or the owner no shot, your sense of injury is very naturally redoubled in both cases, and your animus increased. Envy is a quick match, easily lighted, and needs no spirit added to the wick to make it strike fire and flare into flame.

The Marquis was not a Caliban, and not a fool, though Strathmore, from the eminence of an acute, subtle, and brilliant intellect, chose to call him so. He was a short, plain, grey-haired little man, with small dark eyes, that leered and twinkled viciously; a very sensual mouth, a good deal of wickedness in the upper part of his face, and a good deal of weakness in the lower; a man specially to enjoy taking the world in neatly and slyly, yet a man not difficult to govern by any one who knew his weak points. He had not very many brains, and those he had had been spent

chiefly in the study of Brillat-Savarin, and the elucidation in theory of new *plats* and sauces. He had taken no share whatever in public life, had lived chiefly abroad, was principally noted for his dinners, was considered rather an insignificant person by those who stripped him of his strawberry-leaves ; but being a very great Personage to the world in general, had the kow-tow performed to him to any amount, threw his ermine over his emptiness, covered all cancans with his coronet, and hushed all whispers with his wealth. He was the Marquis of Vavasour — had livings for which the ecclesiastical saints scrambled and truckled, granting him easy absolution for such superior adowsons, and presenting him with a brevet to heaven, as only a decent return for his rich presentations ; he had a considerable amount of family patronage, the eighth cardinal virtue, for which a man will get loved more than for all the other seven put together ; he had a title of the highest rank and longest date ; therefore, though chiefly remarkable for gourmandise and a certain monkeyish malice, this inert, obstinate, sly, and rather demoralised gourmet gave the law, had the *pas*, and was held in high honour and distinction by all, save, indeed, by Strathmore, who thought again, as he looked at his lordship, “ Faugh ! it is Caliban wedded to Miranda ! ” It was the first time that Strathmore had ever thought a woman thrown away upon a man in marriage—ordinarily his opinion was precisely the reverse ! But the Marquis *was* a provocative owner of anything half so

lovely as Marion Lady Vavasour, though it must be confessed he was an easy one ; the liberty he took he gave, he never crossed her caprices, and there were invariably between them that polite *bon accord*, that cool don't-carish, very-happy-to-see-you never-interfere-with-you sort of friendship which is the popular hue of "marriage in high life," and is decidedly the best and least troublesome it can wear. If you have to look long on *one* colour, let it be a well-wearing, never-dazzling *nuance* ; if you have to run in leash, don't pull at the collar, it won't keep your companion from going her pace, and will only gall your own throat for nothing. That discreet, tranquil "friendship" of the Vavasours is an admirable thing ; it's like a well-bred monotone, or a well-bred man that smooths over all things and never makes a row. Galba, who shuts his eyes and shakes hands with Mæcenas, is the wise fellow. Menelaus, who raves, can't rouse his friends in *our* day ; he'll only get a sneering chuckle from them all, from Nestor in at Boodle's, to Amphimachus in at Pratt's, run the risk of a *Times* leader, which is our modern substitute for the pillory, and in lieu of Troy will only obtain—a "Decree Nisi, with *costs* ! "

CHAPTER X.

LA BELLE V. LA BELLE.

WHEN they entered the drawing-room, half an hour after, the first thing that met Strathmore's eyes was the woman who, more or less, had haunted his memory and excited his curiosity since the May night under the lindens, in the solitudes of Bohemia. Lady Vassour was lying back in a dormeuse, glancing through George Sand's last novel; the full light from a chandelier above fell upon her, making the snowy camei dazzling, and the scarlet flowers glow; she looked like some rare and exquisite Sèvres figure as she sat there, with her cheek resting on her hand, and the lashes drooped over her eyes, the form perfect as a statuette of Coysvox, the colouring rich and delicate as an enamel of Fragonard. And yet—those cursed camellias! Was it the strange grouping of those scarlet flowers circling the dead gold of her hair that gave to her something startling with all her seductive-

ness, bizarre with all her beauty, dangerous with all her delicacy ; something that made him involuntarily think of Lucretia Borgia, Catherina Medici, Clytemnestra, Frédégonde, Olympia Mancini, Gunilda, in a *pêle-mêle* chaos of every divine demoniac, every fatal facinatress that the world had seen since the world began ; something which struck him with nothing less than aversion for the first moment that the glowing coronal on the amber hair met his eyes again ; but which then forced him against himself into a dizzy, blind, breathless, admiration, such as no woman had ever wrung from him.

“ That ever such beauty as this should belong to a creature good for nothing but to criticise sauces, smell the bouquets of wines, and gluttonise over green fat ! ” thought Strathmore, who held all gourmands in contemptuous disdain, and this one especial gourmand in particular, as he drew near her, and sank down in a low chair by her couch, regardless that Lady George looked chagrined, and that Lady Beau-desert had signalled him with her fan. The bright beauties of his set rather resented his sudden and immediate desertion to another standard.

“ Lady Vavasour, may I not trust to hear to-night the voice whose music drove the nightingales to despair under the limes ? ” said Strathmore, to the chagrin of Monsignore Villaflôr and a host of baser rivals.

She glanced at him under her silky lashes, and that under-glance was the most dangerous in the world.

"No! I sing to nightingales, but not to order, like a prima donna. The birds can appreciate me, the bores can't!" And her ladyship included, in a disdainful sign of her fan, the men whom Strathmore in his pride had classified as "*comme il faut*, but common-place"—a classification, by-the-by, which would fit, I fear, most of the members of "good society."

"But you sang to ME, and you will sing to me again!" said Strathmore, with the calm, appropriate, Brummellian nonchalance of tone that women always like. Women love an autocratic ruler; even your imperious coquettes, believe me, feel the charm, though they won't, I dare say, often own to it!

"Do not be so sure of that! I am not Malibranch, whom you can hear any night for five guineas, and I did not sing to *you* under the limes; you are infinitely too vain! I sang *pour m'amuser*, and to scandalise those English women who grumbled at the cucumber-soup, and thought me 'evidently not a proper person!' The English are born-travellers. I wonder why they think it necessary to make one of the *spécialités du voyage*, a compound of ice and acid for every stranger they meet?"

"Because suspicion and reserve are to us what their shells are to cocoa-nuts; they make a little kernel look big, and if there's emptiness inside, conceal it," laughed Strathmore. "But you are very cruel to charge me with vanity. If I be vain, have I not food for it in knowing that I am such a subject

of interest to one whose tap from her fan is one of the *cordons d'honneur* of Europe, that she honoured me with studying my character, learning my preferences, and even making researches among my family legends? Lady Vavasour must not send me to Coventry when I remember the Domino Blanc!"

Her eyes laughed with malicious amusement.

"The Domino Blanc seems to have made a great impression on you, Lord Cecil! but only because she knew of the Voltura affair, and you are curious to know *how* she knew it. No woman ever makes you vain. What you are vain of are things like your conduct of the Murat entanglement, when your chief's *à propos* brain attack so obligingly left you alone to steer through the troubled waters. Now, confess me the truth, were you not glad when Lord Templetown had congestion just at that juncture?"

"I believe I was! If a military man's friend dies who had the step above him, his first thought is 'Promotion!—deucedly lucky for me!' His next, 'Poor-fellow!—what a pity!' always comes two seconds after. I understand Voltaire. If your companion's existence at table makes you have a dish dressed as you don't like it, you are naturally relieved if an apoplectic fit empties his chair, and sets you free to say, '*Point de sauce blanche!*' All men are egotists; they only persuade themselves they are not selfish by swearing so so often, that at last they believe what they say. No motive under the sun will stand the microscope; human nature, like a

faded beauty, must only have a demi-lumière ; draw the blinds up, and the blotches come out, the wrinkles show, and the paint peels off. The beauty scolds the servants—men hiss the satirists—who dare to let in daylight !”

She listened, and laughed her low, silver laugh. This was not the conversation with which her courtiers usually entertained her, but, if only as a novelty, she rather liked it.

“ Quite true ! It is only here and there a beauty like *myself* who can brave the noon-tide, and a man who, like *yourself*, can stand the satire, who dare to admit it as true. *I* don’t want rouge yet, and *you* don’t want ruses yet ; but I dare say we shall both come to them, and then we shan’t like the blinds up better than any one else.”

“ Lady Vavasour needing rouge !—it is an impossible stretch of imagination. One cannot realise the doom of mortality thoroughly enough to picture that cheek of child-like bloom ever condescending to the aid of the dressing-box !” smiled Strathmore, his eyes dwelling on the bloom in question, that was softly faint, yet warmly bright, as the flush on a sea-shell.

“ But a diplomatist needing ruses is not so difficult ! You must condescend to the *blanc de perle* of the bureau—White Lies—or you will forsake your *métier*, or your *métier* you. If I can defy enamel, you won’t be able to defy expediency, mon ami !”

Strathmore laughed :

“ Enamelling *is* as much in favour in the cabinets

as in the cabinets de toilettes, I admit, and is very useful in both. Nations suffer for the cost in the one, and husbands for the cost in the other! But, for myself, I don't think I shall ever use the *blanc de perle* you predict. I am of Talleyrand's way of thinking, that the able man disdains so clumsy a tool as falsehood. It is the weapon of the bungler, not of the master. Take refuge in falsehood, and you have dealt a trump into your enemy's hand that he can play against you whenever he likes. The most adroit falsehood is but thin ice that may break any day. The true art is to know how to hold truth, and—how to withhold it; but never to deal with anything else."

"Then you can never humour men, and never flatter them! How can power be obtained without?"

"By using them and ruling them. Men are the wise man's tools, to be commanded, not his mutinous crew to be bribed and pampered!"

She looked at him as he spoke, and saw on his face the look of pitiless power, of imperious passion, of merciless will, that the Gitâna had seen as she studied it under the Bohemian stars—that all saw who looked at the portraits of the Norman Strathmores, when the western sun shone on them through the stained windows at White Ladies—and, while she was fascinated by it, thought to herself how she would soften it, subdue it, break it down beneath her hands, chain it there beneath her feet. Women delight to ponder how "the dove will peck the estridge;" and the keener and fiercer the hawk which is their quarry,

the more they glory in blinding him with the dazzle of their silvery wings, and in disabling him with the music of their soft wood-notes ! Shakspeare knew that women justified his metaphor, though falconer's lore might not !

“ You are very secure of your future,” she laughed, while the brilliant light above her head shone down on the waves of her amber hair, and the scarlet coronal that wound round them, in so startling and strong a contrast of colour—a contrast that no beauty less perfect, less delicate, less exquisitely tinted, could ever have borne. “ Doesn't the Bohemian's prophecy make you tremble ? How horrible it was ! ”

Strathmore laughed too, looking into the lustrous eyes flashing on him sweetly and softly as an Oriental's :

“ Yes ! she gave me plenty of melodrame for my money, but I don't see very well how it can come to pass. I'm not a hero of romance, with a mysterious parentage or a hidden murder ; I shan't make a double marriage, discover a family secret, or take anybody's life in hot or cold blood ! All my actions are patent to the world ; I fear I shall never do anything to merit Redempta's romantic prediction ! But that reminds me, when you talked to me that night, you talked only in French, Lady Vavasour ? I thought you were a Parisienne ? ”

“ Of course you did. I would not give you a clue even to my country.”

“ Which was very cruel, madame ! But though

you gave me no clue, you gave me a promise, and I must claim its fulfilment."

"*I gave you one?* Indeed! I have forgotten it, then. A year ago is an eternity to be called on to remember. Don't you like those Maltese dogs? I think they are such pretty snowy things."

"But *I remember it*," said Strathmore (indisposed to turn the conversation from himself to the lion-pups), with a smile that piqued his companion because she could not translate it. "It was, that when we met again you would thank me for my chivalry, as you honoured me by terming it, and would pay your debt—*comme je voudrais!* I am tempted to be an inexorable creditor!"

The lovely mouth made a *moue boudeuse*, but she gave him the look that she had given him under the lime in Bohemia—soft with all its coquetry, tender with all its dazzling brilliance.

"I dare say! Well! what would content you?" she laughed, softly stirring her fan, while its motion floated the subtle fragrance of her hair to him when he leant towards her.

It was a dangerous question for such lips to put to any man! He could scarce have but one answer rise to his tongue within sight and touch of that tempting loveliness—an answer that could not be uttered in the salons of Vernonçeaux, to the wife of a Peer, to Marion Lady Vavasour! Strathmore bent down towards her till his voice could reach her ear alone, his eyes darkening with that swift, instantaneous light which showed

—to any woman—that the passions he disdained did but sleep, and might yet wake, like “giants refreshed from their slumber.”

“Some day, perhaps, I may dare to tell you—not here, not yet!”

The words escaped him before he knew it. As the perfume of her hair reached him, as he met the glance of her eyes, as he looked on her delicate dazzling face where the light from the chandelier shone upon it, this woman’s beauty captivated him against his will, and made the blood course quicker through his veins, as though he had drunk in the rich bouquet and the subtle strength of some rare ruby wine, warm from the purple clusters of the South. The faint rose-blush, that was the most dangerous of all Lady Vavasour’s charms, since it was the one which flattered most, and most surely counterfeited nature, came on her cheek, and her eyes met his with a languid sweetness. It was the first whisper of the syren’s sea-song, that was to lead by music unto wreck and death; it was the first beckoning of the white arms of Circe, that were to wreath, and twine, and cling, till they should draw down their prey beneath the salt waves flowing over the fathomless abyss whence there is no return.

Then with one of her rapid, coquettish mutations, one of those tantalising *boutades* that were her most cruel and certain witcheries, she signed him away with a blow from her fan, and laughed lightly:

“Lord Cecil, I have talked to you alone for full ten

minutes. I never give any one a longer monopoly. Surrender your place to Monsignore Villaflôr, and let the world in to our conversation."

Strathmore leant back, and nestled himself more closely in among his cushions with calm nonchalance:

"*Pardon, madame!* Monsignore can seat himself, and a signal of your pretty toy will summon the world without my moving. I am very comfortable just now!"

She glanced at him with a sparkle of malicious amusement.

"You are piqued, mon ami, *already!*" she thought, with gratified triumph, as she arched her delicate eyebrows with provoking indifference, and signed Villaflôr towards her. Dormer, Legard, and Rennecourt gathered about her dormeuse the instant the signal permitted them; and for any evidence she gave of remembering his presence, or even his existence, Strathmore might have utterly faded from her memory as she dispensed the mischievous mots, the moqueur smile, the silent dangerous glances that were the war-weapons of the arch coquette whom Lord Vavasour had taken to himself.

She knew that no possible mode of action could have better impressed her on Strathmore's thoughts, the very annoyance it awoke in him with himself, retained her in his mind; the momentary tenderness that had gleamed in her eyes, succeeded by the tantalising indifference of her dismissal, he knew them well enough, they were the tactics of a coquette, and he

hated coquettes, “ women who live on the censing of fools, and spend their time in fooling wise men ! ” he thought, contemptuously, while, without moving so as to give up his place to Villaflôr, or any one else, he began to play écarté with the Vicomte de Clermont, at a table that stood at his elbow. Strathmore was specially fond of that little witching French game ; he was one of the best players in Europe ; he liked its tranquil, subtle finesse that were to be enjoyed without stirring from his dormeuse ; he liked its keen excitement bought for a few Naps a side, and he was tenacious of his reputation in it. Clermont was almost the only member of the Paris Jockey Club who claimed to equal him, and their écarté was always a sharp contest of skill. Another time he would have gone farther out of reach of the babble of conversation round Lady Vavasour’s sofa ; now, Strathmore did not choose to let her think she could be any disturbing element at all. It was a dangerous neighbourhood for écarté, or any game that hung on skill, thought, and finesse, where every word of the silvery mocking voice was to be heard, where every echo of the airy laughter rang on his ear, where the fluttering motion of the fan, the gleam of her amber tresses, the glitter of the camei on an arm as white as they, caught his eye every moment. But Strathmore invariably risked danger in little things as in great ; he never avoided it, he always disdainfully and self-reliantly lingered in it ; it was his strength or his weakness, whichever you like.

He played eight games as scientifically as though he had been in a card-room, with not another face to distract him from that of the king's he marked; and Lady Vavasour, glancing at him, began to doubt her own power. Strathmore leant back, his eyes fixed on the cards he held, his interest centred in the game he played, and she might have been fifty leagues away for any sign she could discover that she disturbed him; the Voltura affair she *might* endure as a rival, states and princes were involved in that, but to be rivalled by *écarté*, by painted pieces of pasteboard and a few Naps a side!—never! She felt her character at stake—her vanity *was*. (There are plenty of people in this world, my good sirs, besides coquettes, who take the one thing for the other, and when they cry out their reputation's attacked, are in truth only snarling from their wounded conceit!) The eight games had been evenly won and lost, they were four all, and they began *la belle*; the Strathmores of White Ladies had never borne patiently to lose in anything, they were a race that dearly loved dominance, and took it, *coute que coute*, like imperious, unyielding Normans as they were; he did not choose that Clermont should beat him; this evening, in especial, defeat would have annoyed him unspeakably.

The luck of the cards had always been with the Vicomte, but Strathmore's play had more than balanced that; it was evident to all those who gathered near the *écarté* table that the game was in his hands. His hostess from a distance watched him over the top

of her fan, while discoursing of turquoise céladon with H.S.H. of Mechlin ; her name had some years before been entangled with his own in that gossip which is rife in those hotbeds of scandal, club-rooms and salons ; the gossip had long given place to newer slander, yet the woman of the world could not wholly lose the tenderness that still clung about her heart for one whom she knew had never loved her—could not wholly keep down a sigh that rose to the lips, against which the gold-powdered down of her fan was pressed. The Marquis, lying half asleep, pondering on a new flavour for a salmi of woodcocks that he should have tried by his *chef* the first day of the season, looked through his shut lids at him with snarling envy. The Marquis always thought “*plus beau que moi—c'est un tort qu'il me fait !*” and the Norman physique of Strathmore specially attracted his attention. “That man's like a Velasquez picture, but he'll do something very bad some day,” muttered Lord Vavasour, comforting himself with the detrimental rider with which we always qualify an admiration extorted from our envy. Most people in the room watched him as *la belle* began, catching the contagion of a skilfully-contested game, and the excitement of a chance so evenly poised that a single card would turn the scale.

Strathmore himself was entirely absorbed in it, entirely intent on it, keenly, eagerly, resolutely bent on winning. He would have lost fifty times the amount staked on it rather than have lost that game at *écarté* ! He played indifferent cards with

such superb skill, such matchless finesse, that *la belle* was all but won, when,—from where she sat near, on her dormeuse, Lady Vavasour leant towards him to look over his hand, to watch his triumph, the fragrance of her hair crossing him like the perfume of some exotic, her lovely lips, whose charm even he had admitted, so near his own that their breath fanned his cheek. He looked up and met her eyes; the dazzling beauty of this woman ran through his veins like subtle fire, and threw him off his guard, as though the air had been suddenly filled with the dreamy intoxicating odour of narcotic fumes, that bewilder the reason and charm while they weaken the senses. He played inadvertently—the wrong card. The false step was not to be retrieved (what false step is ?); it gave the game into Clermont's hands, and for the first time for years Strathmore lost at écarté.

¶ For the instant, trifle though it was, he hated the woman who had unnerved him and fooled him, as passionately, as bitterly, as though the wrong card had been some stain on his honour, the lost game some indelible shame on his name! The bad play he had been betrayed into incensed him enough, but that she should have had this power over him incensed him far more.

“I compliment you on your skill, Clermont. You played admirably. You have beaten *me*! They won't believe it at the Jockey Club!” he said, laughing, as he leant back again among his cushions. His

annoyance only showed itself in his eyes, that darkened with the swift anger of his pitiless race, though the rest of his face never changed.

“When I came to look on at your victory, it was very uncomplimentary to entertain me with a defeat. I thought you were the best *écarté* player in Europe,” said Lady Vavasour, maliciously, with a slight shrug of her snowy shoulders, and as much tranquil unconcern as though she were innocent and ignorant of having done all the mischief.

“Lady Vavasour, from Paradise downwards feminine interference was never productive but of a losing game for man!” said Strathmore, in the tranquil *trainante* tones in which he always spoke his rudest things.

She laughed softly; it amused her; he had lost his game and she had won hers.

“*L'une belle te perdait l'autre, très cher,*” said Rennecourt to Strathmore, as they went to the smoking-room that night, when the women had deserted the drawing-rooms and gone to their chambers and their novels and their charming négligées in the Galerie des Dames.

Strathmore suppressed an impatient oath to himself; the libel, like most libels, was unpalatable because it was true. He hated the woman whose mere touch had so fooled him, and whose sway and whose spells, as he had seen her that night, he had been forced to confess the wildest rumours had not overdrawn. But for all that, though he owed her his defeat at *écarté*,

and loathed her sudden and subtle power over him, as he lay on the couch of the smoking-room that night, while Baden favourites, new caprices of reigning lionnes, the hushed-up affair of the marked cards at Flora Dohla's, in which well-known names were involved, the *dernier débauche* of a Russian Prince, who was startling even Paris, were chatted over with the freedom that's only attained when the papooshes are on and the ladies are off, and is enjoyed like the ease of the dressing-gown after the restraint of the *grande tenue*, Strathmore felt a keener detestation still for his lordship of Vavasour and Vaux, as he glanced at the Marquis (who, wrapped in his luxurious Cashmere robes, looked something like an over-fed monkey, grizzled with age and pampered with eating, as his eyes leered and twinkled at a *grivois* tale), and thought as he glanced, "Faugh! that Caliban to——!"

It was an envy and an impatience that many before him had smarted under, looking at her lord and master, so made and termed by marital right, and thinking of Marion Lady Vavasour.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DAUGHTER OF EVE IN THE GARDEN OF ROSES.

STRATHMORE very rarely got up early ; usually he had his chocolate brought to him, glanced through new novels, read his letters, had his first cigar before he rose, and then lounged down among the latest to breakfast. He was accustomed to say, that your best *causeur* is dull over his coffee ; with his cutlets, a man thinks of consols and coupons, and with his anchovy only finds relish for telegrams ; in the oil of his sardines his satire is swamped, and as he breaks his plover's eggs he's only good for reading and speaking political platitudes ; his head's admirably clear, but his wit isn't ripe. Therefore Strathmore's rule always was, "Do your own business before noon ; but don't be bored by your friends till after. In the morning we're all cautious, not convivial : so breakfast and write to your lawyer in solitude ; congregate at luncheon, and take *croustades* and conversation together !"

It was a very good rule, I think; letters written in the morning never compromise you; mots made in the morning never amuse you: and it was one he seldom broke.

But the morning after his arrival at Vernonçaux, when Diaz entered his chamber to fill his bath, the breeze as it blew in from the windows, which had been partially left open through the hot night, came so pleasantly laden with the fragrance of the rose-gardens, the pine-woods, and the vine-covered hills, that it seemed for once more tempting than his yellow-papered *roman* and his chocolat à la Vanille, which had both a strong flavour of Paris; a flavour than which ordinarily *on ne peut mieux*; but Paris, like partridges, may want change sometimes, and pall—as what doesn't, from women to wine?—under the ruinous test of “*Toujours!*” For once Strathmore felt tempted to get up early; and he rose, dressed, and sauntered out by an *escalier* that led, without passing through any part of the building, from his wing of the château down into the gardens below.

“A device of some dainty châtelaine, some *dame des beaux cousins*, for her lover to pass up to her chamber without waking the seneschal, or risking his limbs by climbing,” thought Strathmore, as he stood on the grey stone steps looking over at the gardens that lay before him. “Well! we have *escaliers dérobés* still! Licence may have gone out of the language, but it hasn't gone out of the manners; we've learnt to be

hypocrites, but we haven't altered our tastes. To advance in Civilisation is, after all, only to perfect Cant. The nude figure remains the same delight to the precisian as the profligate; but he drapes her discreetly in public, while he gloats over her *undraped in petto*. Men don't change their natures, only their faces!"

With which, Strathmore sauntered down the steps, and took any way that hazard led him, which was through the bronze trellis-work gates that opened into his hostess's rose-gardens, mazes of blossom, where the birds sang under the roses, and the air was full of the rich fragrance of clusters of crimson bloom, as he strolled slowly along, profaning these sacred precincts, that were as consecrated to ladies as the gardens of Odalisques, with the scent and the smoke of his Manilla. There is something in the freshness, the stillness, the sunny calm of early morning, that has its charm, even when we are least inclined to give way to these things, and most inclined to sneer at them. Strathmore—essentially a man "of the world, worldly"—who lived in courts, clubs, and salons, who had never got up and come on deck to see the sun rise any day that his yacht was at anchor in the Bosphorus; whose manual was Rochefoucauld, and breviary Bruyère; whose life had been spent in an atmosphere scented with perfumes and pastilles, where daylight was never needed and never remembered, and a purer air would have lacked in excitement; even Strathmore, though nature was not much more to him than to Talleyrand or Grammont, felt the

freshness, the tranquillity, the peacefulness of the hour. It was perfectly still and solitary round him, there was not a sound but of the wood-pigeons cooing from afar off, and the wind gently stealing through the fragrant aisles of the rose arcades, while the sun fell on the eastern side of the silent château, and on the terrace, with its grey balustrade covered by gorgeous creepers, that looked like the background of some Louis Quinze picture. He knew no one would have risen except the household at that early hour, and as he walked on, just under the terrace, that was at some considerable elevation above him, a voice startled him as it fell on the air :

“ Since when have you become pastoral ? I should not have fancied you had had sylvan tastes, mon ami ! ”

She stood immediately above him, leaning over the stone balustrade ; behind her was the ivy-hung façade of the château, with its peaked *tourelles* and its long range of Gothic windows ; beneath her sloped the ivy wall of the terrace, covered with the broad leaves of creepers and the profuse blossoms of the twining roses ; the whole scene was like a landscape of Greuze or Lancret, and she who completed it added to its colouring of the Beau Siècle where she leaned on the parapet, looking down with a smile on lips that rivalled the half-opened roses. As he glanced upward, her loveliness swept over him like the intoxication of some dreamy perfume, now in the cooler judgment of morning, as at midnight, a few hours before, when the light of the chandeliers glanced on the scarlet ca-

mellias. Away from her he could criticise, condemn, displace, defy her ; in her presence, with her eyes smiling down into his, with her voice vibrating on the air, he might resent, but he could not resist her. She enthralled him by the senses, so subtilely, so seductively, that she drew him within the charmed circle of her power, even while he hated her for her dominance over him.

“Sylvan tastes or not, would not any one, from an idler to an anchorite, be irresistibly drawn where the early morning proffers such a reward to all those who rise early ?” said Strathmore, as he ascended the terrace steps to her side.

He had not seen her, until her greeting made him look upwards. But what man can tell the precise truth to a beautiful woman ? She smiled as she gave him her hand, white, small, soft, with the jewels of an Empress upon it ; a hand to close gently but surely on the life of a man, and make it its own ; a hand to be raved of by poets, and hold sages in thraldom ; to be modelled by sculptors, and coveted by courtiers.

“Last night you were quoting from Genesis to show the mischief done by a woman ! How can you be so inconsistent as to seek one in Eve’s special province of mischief—a garden ? A diplomatist tasting the dew of the dawn, and sunning himself among roses !—you *are* an anomaly, mon ami. Is it your lost écarté which has dwelt on your mind, that you are wandering at such an unearthly hour ?”

“It is more likely to be remembrance of the one

who lost me the écarté!" said Strathmore, bending towards her.

His voice had an unusual softness, his eyes darkened and dwelt on her, fascinated by the voluptuous charm of her beauty, and the confession broke from him unawares. She arched her delicate eyebrows, and looked at him with mischievous amusement, where she leaned against the rose-wreathed parapet.

"Of M. de Clermont! You must be very deep in his debt for him to haunt you!—or perhaps you were meditating some sure, silent revenge on him?—that would be more à la Strathmore!"

"I thank you for the hint and the reminder, belle amie; I *will* revenge myself for the game that I lost on the tactician who threw me off my guard! But the revenge, like the payment I spoke of last night, must wait; it would be too great rashness to risk taking either as yet——"

He spoke softly, and with meaning; her power was winding itself about him, his senses were yielding themselves to the languid charm, the subtle spell of her beauty; Strathmore, who denied that any woman could be dangerous to him, might have known, then, how dangerous *one* might be! She blushed slightly, softly, and played with one of the rings of her left hand—the diamond-studded circlet that was the badge of her marriage—was it by hazard, or as a warning? Be it which it might, it served to recall to him that the woman he looked on was Marion Lady Vavasour, the arch coquette of Europe.

"I was unaware your tastes were à la Phyllis, Lady Vavasour," he went on, with the smile, slight, cold, half a sneer, which piqued her more than anything, since it perplexed her as to its meaning, and only gave her a vague idea that her game was foreseen, and—defied. "What charm can the early morning have for you? Your preferences, surely, are no more sylvan than mine, and there is nothing to be captivated but the bees and the birds! I have read in some old Trouvère song of a *breuvage* for perpetual youth and beauty, to be gathered from the first dew of roses—can *that* be your mission? If so, we must pity, as under De l'Enclos, generations unborn, who will suffer like us!"

"Don't use the first person!—*you* never suffer," she answered him, toying with the hanging sprays of the roses. "The charm that guided me was what rules me always—the caprice of the hour: I admit no other law! In Paris one never thinks the day is aired till two; but in the country—*c'est toute autre chose*—I heard the birds singing, the scent of the roses came through my windows, and—Ah, Lord Cecil, though we live in the world till we forget it, there are things better than pleasure, there is an air purer than the air of the salons! I am young, I am flattered, I reign, I love my sovereignty—who does not that has a sceptre to grasp?—and still, sometimes I wish that I were a peasant-child, playing with the brown chesnuts under the trees, and catching the butterflies in the sunshine!"

I have said that she had now and then a *tendresse*, a mournfulness, real or assumed ; and at such moments, while the lids drooped softly over the black gazelle eyes, and a shadow of sadness stole the brilliance from her face, she was yet more resistless than in her most dazzling coquetry. Even Strathmore felt its charm, though, now, with the gesture that had recalled to him her title and her ownership, he had steeled himself afresh against her.

“Indeed !” he answered her, with the smile she mistrusted. “The world would scarcely credit you, Lady Vavasour ; to play with men’s lives must be more amusing than with fallen chesnuts, and to catch Princes and Peers in your net must be more exciting than the child’s yellow butterflies ! Who shall hope to be content if the envied of all wishes to alter her lot !”

“Ah ! mon ami, those who envy us do not always know us. Among all rose-leaves there is one crumpled !” Her voice was saddened, the lustre of her eyes grew languid and softened, and her fingers unconsciously played with the diamond wedding-ring upon her finger, as it sparkled among the roses. Again the action spoke more eloquently than words. Besides her fascination, she tried now a charm more dangerous for him—she claimed his pity ! “Look !” she went on, as she took one of the flowers and opened its fresh crimson leaves. “Look ! as the rose swings in the sunlight, how lovely it is—the Queen of flowers ! And yet, at its core lies a canker !”

“ Is it so with *our Queen of Flowers?* ”

He asked it involuntarily, bending lower towards her, till he saw the faint sigh with which her bosom heaved, under the gossamer lace that shrouded it.

“ Hush ! ” she said softly, with a light blow of the rose spray on his arm. “ You must not ask. I wear the badge of servitude and—silence ! ”

And silence fell between them ; such silence as fell between Launcelot and Guenevere, when the first subtle poison ran through the veins of the man whom Arthur loved.

With a light laugh the silence was broken, as she flung the gathered spray off on the sunny air, and let her white hands wander afresh among the twining blossoms :

“ I like roses, don’t you ? They are the flowers of poetry. I don’t wonder Cleopatra had her couch of them, and the Epicureans loved them showered down as they sat at banquet, and strewn upon the floors ankle-deep ! They are the flowers of silence, of revel, of love ; the flowers of the Greek poets and the Provence Trouvères ; of the chaplets of Catullus and the lays of Chastelâr. Roses are for all time—while they bloom afresh with every summer, how can the earth fail to guard its eternal youth ? ”

While she spoke, she drew out one of the roses from the rest, crimson, and fresh, and fragrant, with the dew glittering still in its odorous core ; and broke it off with its unopened buds and dark shining leaves.

"Is it not worthy Cleopatra?" she laughed, holding it up in the light before her eyes and his—his that followed her as she fastened the rose in her bosom with negligent grace, where it nestled half hidden, half seen, lying against the white skin that the tracery of the lace covered without wholly concealing, and contrasting its snowy beauty with its deep crimson petals. "Come! we have been talking mournfully, and I meant to teach you epicureanism—you who trample aside the roses of life, and covet only the withered yellow laurels of Age and Power. Adieu! I must leave you to finish your solitary promenades; I am going in to my chocolate!"

His eyes dwelt on her, on the rose, where it lay half hidden on her heart, on the hair lit to gold by the sunshine, on the antelope eyes that glanced at him through their black lashes, on the exquisite and voluptuous grace of her form. Though it had fastened fetters on him which had made him this woman's slave for life, he could not have resisted his impulse to follow her then; she fascinated him by the senses, and it was a fascination to which he chose to yield. What evil could lie in it for him? He was strong in his own strength, secure in his own coldness; he believed he could handle fire without feeling its flame; he believed he could let the whirlwind sweep over him, without being stirred by its breath; he believed he could meet the sirocco, and not be blinded, nor staggered, nor scorched by it. Actually, he would have called the man a lunatic

who did these things : metaphorically, and quite as dangerously, he did them all. A scornful self-confidence made at once the grandeur and the weakness of Strathmore's nature.

As Lady Vavasour turned from the parapet and swept over the grey pavement of the rose-terrace to re-enter the château, the snowy folds of her dress gathering up the fallen crimson leaves, and her head slightly turned over her shoulder in adieu to him, he followed her, bending to her with a few low words :

“ Who would not learn epicureanism or any other creed from such a teacher ? You have given that senseless rose so fair a lodging ; do not banish *me* utterly ! I am going to my chocolate, too ; must *I* take it in solitude ? For the remembrance of our tête-à-tête meal under the limes, let us breakfast tête-à-tête this morning ! ”

The daughter of Eve had tempted him in the garden of roses, and while yet he might have turned away, he chose to follow and to linger with his temptress.

CHAPTER XII.

IN ROYAL BROCELIANDE.

IN the breakfast-room every déjeûner delicacy was waiting, ready for such of the English guests at Vernonçaux as it might pleasure to come down stairs early. None had so pleased that morning save themselves, and this breakfast *was tête-à-tête*. He was alone with her, and in that solitude she ceased to be Lady Vavasour, whom he prejudged and mistrusted; she was the songstress, the incognita, the witching waif and stray of the Bohemian lindens. Almost *too* dazzling at night, with its exquisite tint, and its singular contrast of eyes and of hair, her loveliness, losing none of its brilliance, gained much in softness with the morning light. Moreover, you saw then how real was this youth, how wholly from nature this marvellous colouring; for, stream down on her as the sun would, its strongest rays could never show a flaw or a blemish.

Used to the women of Courts, no woman would have had charm for Strathmore who had not had wit on her lips and a finished grace in her coquetteries, and that nameless air which the world alone gives; the fairest *bourgeoise* beauty he would have passed unnoticed, and rustic loveliness was no loveliness in his sight.

Condemned to love, he would have made his condition like Louis Quatorze, “*qu'on m'aime mais avec de l'esprit!*” Therefore, Marion Vavasour had her subtlest charm for him, in that exquisite grace which empresses had envied her; in that sparkling play which, if it were not wit, sufficed for it from such lips; in that very worldliness which might have chilled as heartlessness men less *petri* with the world themselves than Strathmore was. What had struck him the night before as startling and bizarre, what even in his momentary breathless admiration of her had repelled him, and made him think of Clytemnestra and La Borgia, had gone,—perhaps, with the scarlet camellias!

She was dressed simply, in snowy gossamer folds of muslin, with floating azure ribbons here and there, and the richness of her yellow hair, gathered back in its natural waves and ripples, looked but one soft mass of dead gold now it was unmixed with any colour. There was nothing to mar the spells of her beauty, and those spells she wove to her uttermost witchery as she sat daintily brushing the bloom off a grape, or toying with her strawberries, adding the cream to her

chocolate, or touching the tiny wing of some delicate bird.

With all her caprices, her coquetteries, her rapid wayward mutations, she was ever essentially feminine; too skilful not to know that the surest charm which a woman wields over men is the charm of difference—the charm of sex; and that half this charm is flown when Christina of Sweden wears her hessians and cracks her whip; when her imitators of to-day chatter slang with weeds in their mouths, and swing through the stable-yards, talking in loud *ravage* voices of dogs with a “good strain!”

They were full an hour alone, and in that hour she led him far on a dangerous road; none the less dangerous because he knew her tactics and deemed himself secure to defy them. She was a coquette, therefore he was armed against her; she was a woman of the world, therefore he could trifle with her with impunity; she was Lady Vavasour, therefore he knew the worth of every smile, the value of every glance, which were but golden hooks flung out by skill to catch and fasten the unwary: so Strathmore reasoned—he who was a man of the world, and would lose his head for no woman!—and in his security lay his risk. For he felt that she had already a certain power over him—the power for which he hated her when he threw down his losing cards at *écarté*—the power with which her beauty had swept over him as he had come suddenly upon her in the sunlight of the rose-garden; but to have feared it would have

been to confess that he might yield to it, and Strathmore held that he could evoke a storm and then arrest it with "Thus far shalt thou go and no farther;" he held that he could let poison flow into his veins and then eject it with "I do not choose to receive thee!"

The disdainful strength of the Strathmores had ever, I say, been their weakness; and the ruin that had come to them had ever been wrought by their own hand; the graven steel of their unyielding race ever the reed that bent beneath them.

The tête-à-tête breakfast was as seductive as any meal ever has been since She of the Golden Shuttle entertained the wanderer at Ogygia. Through the shaded windows the rose-scented air stole fragrantly in, while stray rays of sunlight streamed upon the amber grapes touched by her delicate fingers, and on the crimson rose lying hid in its snowy nest. Her moods were as variable as summer clouds, and her mood that morning was soft, subdued, gentle with all its gaiety, triste with all its coquettishness, and—it was the most bewitching of all.

"What is your White Ladies like—they say it is such a superb old place?" she said, when her mischievous witticisms ceased, as though tired with their own play and sparkle. "Charlie St. Albans—who told me your family legend, by the way, one day at Biarritz—raves about its beauty. It was an abbey, wasn't it?"

"An old Dominican monastery—yes. It has a beauty of its own, the beauty of that past when men sought rest as we now seek reputation, and found in solitude what *we* find in strife. May I not hope you will some day honour it with a visit, Lady Vavasour, and judge of it yourself?" he answered her, stroking her greyhound; his prejudice against her was quickly fading since he invited her to White Ladies—the daughter of Eve to the ancient Monastery!

She smiled the dazzling smile that had intoxicated wise men to worse than the madness of the opium-eater.

"Perhaps. Some day—some day. Ah, what may we all do 'some day!' You and I may be foes à *outrance* some day—who knows?"

"Foes? Nay, surely not. Did you not tell me 'destiny threw us together, that we must be friends?' *Dieu le veut!*"

"*Dieu veut ce que femme veut, mon ami!*" said the Marchioness, arching her eyebrows. "You know that; and on a man who despairs the love of all my sex I am not at all inclined to waste my own friendship!"

"Why, you had better rather cure me of my heresy in both. What teacher could convert me to her soft doctrines with such success? what rebuke could be at once more merciful and more convincing to me?"

A sadness, almost tenderness, shaded the dark gazelle eyes for a moment as they met his, and she

was silent. Lady Vavasour knew the charm of silence when the eyes may be trusted to speak. A moment after she laughed coquettishly :

“Merciful? Perhaps not, monsieur, if I *did* take your conversion in hand.”

“True. Perhaps the denial of your friendship is more merciful than its donation would be. Nevertheless, at all risks, I will seek it.”

“You love risks?” she said, looking at him with a dash of tantalising malice. Strathmore laughed slightly—a laugh that sounded to her like contempt of her power.

“Well, I confess I do not fear many.”

“Nor did Ragnar Ladbrog, mon ami, the northern Scalds tell us; sheathed in his armour of ice, what could attack him? How scathless he went for so long! And yet he came at last to his Hella, and he languished to death in the cave of the serpents. Take warning!”

Strathmore smiled.

“I am not quite so quixotic as the Bersaker, and before I handle serpents I take out their stings! Grasped rightly, no serpent can bite. But surely, belle amie, you do not pay yourself so ill a compliment as to compare the gift of your friendship with the fang of an asp? Though perhaps you are right—it may be as dangerous!”

“But a danger you smile at! Well, take it if you will. Shall we be friends, then, Lord Cecil?”

Her eyes were resistless in their witching softness,

and a certain tremulous smile that seemed half born of a sigh was on her lip, as she held out in playfulness, yet in earnest, her white jewelled hand, as she leant slightly towards him. What man could have rejected the hand or the friendship ?

Strathmore bent forward and accepted both : as he took the warm fingers within his own and met the glance that dwelt on him as they sat there alone in the shaded light, his pulses quickened, and his own eyes gleamed with something of the swift dark brilliance that she had sworn to lighten there—the dawn of the passion she had vowed to awaken in the nature that, by character imperious and unyielding, deemed itself by a fatal error to be also cold and calm. He released her hand suddenly, and threw himself back in his chair ; the doors opened, and with Beaudesert and Clermont there entered Lord Vavasour and Vaux.

“ Bon jour, messieurs,” said the Marchioness, including her lord in her negligent, graceful salutation. “ I suppose you have all been wasting the hours over cheroots and novelettes that I have been giving to the roses. Ah, if you were all to see the sun rise once in a way, what a deal of good it would do you ! I will have a Trianon, and then, perhaps, you *will* learn to be pastoral. M. de Clermont, will you milk the cow like the Comte d’Artois ? Vavasour, did I ever tell you that it was to Lord Cecil Strathmore I owed my escape that dreadful night at Prague ? No ? I ought to have done ; then you have never thanked him ?”

Her husband, thus apostrophised, turned to Strathmore, and addressed his thanks to him, complimenting him with as gracious a courtesy as that pampered, gouty gourmet, whose general manner was guilty of Valdor's impeachment, a "*ton de garnison*," could assume for any mortal. "Singularly striking-looking man—quite Vandyke!" thought the Marquis, while he uttered his gratitude for his wife's rescue; "but I am sure he will do something bad some day—come to a violent death, perhaps. That *physique*—very much so!" Which possibly was a complacent source of gratification to his lordship, as he had just come in on a tête-à-tête.

Strathmore received his thanks with that cold negligence which had the effect of making him cordially disliked out of his own immediate set, and lay back in his chair, playing with the greyhound, and joining now and then in the conversation. He knew that this woman's beauty stole on him despite himself; when her magic was off him he hated her for the food that she had made him give her vanity; but a seductive sensuousness allured him in her glorious loveliness, which, though he rated it lightly, should have made him place distance betwixt him and its subtle temptation—betwixt him and the wife of Lord Vavasour.

A weak man might have done this, and been strong; Strathmore, a strong man, stayed, contemptuous and defiant of the weakness. A man less cool, less keen, less nonchalant of all danger, might have taken warn-

ing; he saw no danger possible in it. One careless, over-confident turn of the hand may mar the whole of the statue which the sculptor deems plastic as clay to his will, obedient to every stroke of his chisel!

The statue that Strathmore at once moulded and marred was his Life: the statue which we all, as we sketch it, endow with the strength of the Milo, the glory of the Belvedere, the winged brilliance of the Perseus!—which ever lies at its best, when the chisel has dropped from our hands, as they grow powerless and paralysed with death, like the mutilated Torso, a fragment unfinished and broken; food for the ants and worms, buried in sands that will quickly suck it down from sight or memory, with but touches of glory and of value left here and there, only faintly serving to show what *might have been*, had we had time, had we had wisdom!

“Well, wasn’t I right; isn’t she divine, eh?” said Valdor to him that day, as they were playing billiards.

“She—who? My dear fellow, there are half a dozen divinities here who wear the cestus of Venus, or claim it at the least! Be a little more definite!”

“The deuce! Who should I mean? Nobody can hold a candle to her. Vavasour’s in luck to have a wife that everybody envies him.”

“Dubious luck!” said Strathmore, sticking his penknife through his cabana. “A wife of the first water, like a diamond of the first water, is rather a perilous possession. It’s apt to be disputed by too

many owners ! You can't ever be sure the wards haven't been picked and the casket been rifled ! ”

“ Exactly,” said Legard. “ Marriage is a disagreeable legal necessity for men with titles and entails, and the best colour for a wife's discreet plainness. No Bramah can protect you so effectually as an ugly choice ; besides, I shouldn't think it's bad for yourself upon principle ; if Lucretia's unlovely you must relish Lais and her graces all the more. One never enjoys a good omelette at Véfour's so much as after an ill-done one in the Grisons.”

“ There's something in that,” said Valdor, reflectively. “ But then — twelve hours with an ugly woman would kill one ! Why *are* any of them ugly, I wonder ? They were created on purpose for us. What's the good of giving us five out of six, as we don't like them ? If they were all such as the Vavasour, now——” And Valdor paused, in mute contemplation of the delicious universal seraglio that might then be commanded.

“ The Vavasour's something that comes once in a century. The deuce ! how that woman does flirt ! ” interrupted Dormer, in the tone, half disgusted, half admiring, with which a man might say of some magnificent drunkard, like Piron, “ How that fellow does drink ! ”

Strathmore sent his ball to make a *ricochet* with a certain impetus, as if the conversation annoyed him, and did not join in it.

“ If fifty naughty stories ain't rife about her before

next season, I'll bet you a thousand to one," went on Dormer, offering his wager generally, but nobody, it seemed, having sufficient confidence in her ladyship to be chivalrous enough to take it up! "They *do* say it's only flirtation—as yet; and I believe she's as heartless as ice; but she does horrible mischief, if she's never absolutely 'compromised,' and I think *that's* open to doubt! At Biarritz, last year, she played the very deuce with Marc Lennartson; you remember him, don't you, Strathmore—Austrian Cuirassiers, you know? She drew him on and on, made him follow her about like a greyhound, fooled him before everybody, and then turned him off coolly for the Prince de Vorhn, and laughed at him with a blow of her fan. Lennartson had lost his head about her, and he shot himself through the brain! I know that for a fact; nothing but that woman at the bottom of it; and the very night she heard of his death she went to a fancy ball, fluttering about in her diamonds. By Jove! it was too bad, wasn't it?"

Strathmore made a hap-hazard cannon, with his coldest sneer upon his face: the story angered him.

"My dear Dormer! if a man's such a fool as to 'follow a woman about like a lapdog,' whether he goes out of the world or stays in it doesn't matter very much, I think. Yours is a romantic story; it would charm the women, but, *pour moi!* I must fancy there were some heavy debts hanging over Lennartson's head, or some more rational reason for your senti-

mental finale. I don't credit those things quite so easily."

"It *was* true, whether you like to believe it or not."

Strathmore lifted his eyebrows and dropped the subject; he would have said it did not interest him!

"What a voice of lamentation there was in Ramah when Vavasour married her," said Beaudesert, who was betting on the game. "The women had made such hard running on him all over Europe; when the regular troops had always missed fire, it was a horrid blow to have an outside skirmisher knock him over!"

"Of course! Virtuous women love to take in hand the conversion of a sinner when the penitent can give them a coronet; they are very happy to be taken, like soda-water after a debauch, if the debauchee excuses his past orgies with a page in Burke. There wasn't a *précieuse* in England that wouldn't have sold her pure soul to the devil and the Marquis, for his settlements. The morals of monde, and demi-monde, don't differ very much, after all, only the inferior goods are content with Rue de la Paix jewellery, and Lady Vavasour et C^{ie} don't let themselves go under anything less than the family diamonds!" said Strathmore, with his coldest sneer. It gratified him to fling the sarcasm at that marriage of convenience where Helen of the antelope eyes had bartered herself for the gold and the titles of gourmand Menelaus; the flash and sparkle of the diamond

circlet he had seen among the roses, added, by its memory, point to his irony.

“Quite right!” laughed Beaudesert. “And when we have to pay such a much heavier price to monde, and get so much better amused by demi-monde, how the deuce can they wonder we prefer ease to imprisonment, and *laissez-faire* to *il faut faire*? ”

“Perhaps they *don’t* wonder, my good fellow, and in that lies the essence of their pique and the root of their philippics. If the debatable land’s so agreeable, they know very well the time may come when the legitimate kingdoms will be left altogether,” laughed Strathmore, as he went back to his game, and, Lady Vavasour not being there to spoil it, won it, as he piqued himself on winning most things that he tried for in life, from billiards upwards.

As he finished it, a servant entered to tell him that the horses were coming round; he had promised to make one of a riding-party at four o’clock, and left the billiard-room with Dormer to obey the summons.

“The pretty panther, how handsome she looks! She has merciless *griffes*, though, and her graceful play’s death to those who play with her,” said Dormer, under his moustaches, memories of Biarritz rising savagely within him as they passed out of the long gallery leading from the billiard-room into the great hall.

The “pretty panther,” as he called her, was just at that moment standing on the grand staircase with some men about her, holding her jewelled whip in

one hand, and the violet folds of her habit in the other, the light from the long range of stained windows falling on her, and on the tapestried arras, the damascened armour, and the dark oak carvings of the wall behind her. Strathmore glanced at her, and gave Dormer his coldest laugh.

“ Fearfully poetic you are to-day, Will ! Have you been scratched yourself ? ”

“ No ; but you’re about to be.”

“ *I* ? You don’t know me much, my good fellow.”

“ But I know *HER*, and I bet you five to one that she is trying to play the deuce with you, Strathmore.”

“ Let her try ! I have one bet pending already on that event, but I’m quite willing to take yours too.”

“ Glad to hear it ; but forewarned’s forearmed, you know.”

“ Thank you,” said Strathmore, with that negligent coldness which was as chilly as ice, “ but when I need counsel I ask for it, my dear Dormer. It is a dish I am not very fond of having offered me.”

His eyes had lightened to the swift dark anger of his race ; and Dormer, a good-natured, easy, indolent fellow, accustomed to be put down by him, and to be silenced by his sneer, held his peace with an obedience, the relic of their old Eton days ; while Strathmore joined the group on the staircase, and, by a nonchalant finesse, displaced the others, who had a prior claim as before him in the field, and leading her out into the court, assisted Lady Vavasour to mount the spirited Spanish mare that he had admired as it

had reared with her, when he had seen the riding-party from the distance the previous day. Assistance, indeed, she needed little; an inimitable rider, she sprang, lightly as a bird to a bough, to her saddle; but to have the foot beautiful as Pompadour's placed on his hand, the light weight leant upon him for an instant, the perfumed hair brush near him, the hand touch his as he put the reins within it, the lips softly thank him,—these made a service bitterly envied to Strathmore. As she dashed out of the great gates of the court, the mare rearing and plunging with the fire of its Spanish blood, Lady Vavasour had never looked, perhaps, lovelier, with her delicate cheeks flushed from the exertion of her strength, her light, defiant laugh ringing out, her eyes flashing with impatient *will*. Yet for one moment as he saw her teeth clench tightly, her eyes gather a sinister light, her whip cut the mare with sharp, stinging strokes, it crossed Strathmore's mind that the real instinct, the true pleasure of this soft, dazzling woman might be, after all, Cruelty—the cruelty of the young cat that loves to see the wounded bird flutter and shriek and struggle for its liberty with the blood dabbling the broken wing, and to let it go for one fleet mocking moment, and then to seize on it afresh, till the death-cry rings sharp and clear upon the air, and its own white teeth tear asunder the quivering flesh.

The fancy crossed him, and the aversion, amounting to almost the strength of hatred, which, mingled with the fascination that Marion Vavasour had for

him, flamed up in all its bitterness. “She danced in her diamonds the night that poor devil shot himself!” he thought; “I dare say. What fools men are to let a woman play with them.”

But twenty minutes after, Lady Vavasour turned her head towards him with her brightest smile. “Lord Cecil, you are our cicerone; which way leads to the Brèche du Gaston?” And as he spurred his horse to overtake her, and cantered on by her side, the wiser thought was forgot, the danger that was in this woman served but to give piquance to her beauty, as the thorns of the rose which pique those who admire to gather it; and as though she had divined the verdict that his reason was given against her, she chained him to her side during the ride, and had all that softness of manner which, when she chose to assume it, would have made the testimony of men and angels weigh nothing against Marion Lady Vavasour!

“So, if I come to England this year, as Lady Beaudesert tries to persuade me, you will be prepared to do me the honours of White Ladies?” she said, laughing, to him an hour afterwards, as, having outstripped the rest of the party, they rode through a waggon-way that ran under the shelter of the hills, with the wild vine clustering in rich luxuriance from bough to bough, and the glowing lights slanting in, to turn the moss into gold, and burnish the ripening grapes into bloom.

“But too gladly! Since the Reine Blanche was received there the Abbey will never have sheltered so fair a guest. But Mary Stuart came to us as a

captive; you will come as a captor omnipotent! Your sceptre rests on a sway that men cannot break, and your kingdom lies in a power more potent than mailed might——!”

“Ah!” she said, softly and mournfully, “but don’t you know the Reine Blanche had my sceptre and my kingdom too, and yet—her hair whitened and her head was bent to the block! She was a captive at White Ladies? and I dare say my lord of Strathmore was a courtly but a pitiless gaoler, had many a courtier phrase upon his tongue, but never relented to mercy! What a *triste souvenir!* I shall be afraid to come there; perhaps you will imprison me!”

Strathmore bent down in his saddle and looked into her eyes, while his own grew dark and brilliant, and the coldness of his face softened. Was it the warmth flung on it from above by the amber sunlight that was streaming through the vine-leaves and the purpling grapes?

“That I shall be tempted, I would not deny! Who could, who spoke truth?”

The reins drooped on their horses’ necks, they paced slowly over the yielding mosses, their speed slackening, their voices softening, under the leafy boughs and the tangled tendrils of the drooping vines; the warm sun fell between the stems of the trees, the leaves were stirless in the sultry air, the birds sang with subdued music in the woodland shadow—and they rode onwards, as in the days of the past, Launcelot and Guenevere rode through the silent aisles and forest shades of Royal Broceliande.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WEAVING OF THE GOLDEN SHUTTLE.

BERTIE ERROLL sat at the head of the dinner-table at White Ladies with other spirits like himself, keeping the house open, as he had been bidden to do by his absent host in the first week of September. Dinner was just over, and the Sabreur lay back in his chair, lazily peeling a nectarine, recommending the Marcobrunn to Langley of the Twelfth, vowing it was deucedly warm, and lamenting pathetically that Strathmore would prefer the click of the roulette-ball to the glories of the open, the pleasures of pair et passe to those of the stubble, and forsake White Ladies thus perpetually for the Continent.

Some half-dozen men were down with him for the shooting; Strathmore had always bade him look on White Ladies as though it were his own home, to open to whom he would; and they were chatting over their grapes, peaches, and comet wines this

warm, mellow September evening, while the last rays of the setting sun fell across Erroll's fair frank face as they slanted through the painted windows of the dining-hall, where the scutcheon of the Strathmores was blazoned, with their merciless motto, "**Slay! and spare not!**" radiant in gold and gules.

"We don't want women in September," Rockingham of the Guards was observing, with more truth, perhaps, than politeness. "They're delightful in their season, but when we're shooting we're better without 'em. Pausset took Valérie Brown and that lot down to Market Harborough last season, and we were positively ruined by 'em! Champagne suppers at two in the morning, and all the rest of it, put us shockingly out of condition; we were hardly in at a death, any one of us, all thanks to those confounded women——"

"Phryne *v.* the Pytchley! St. John's Wood morals spoiling Northamptonshire runs! You should write a 'Tract for the Times' on it; a 'Warning to the Pink not to trifle with the Rouge,'" laughed the Sabreur, pouring himself out some Rhenish. "Well, thank God, I'd suffer deterioration any day from that quarter. A bright-eyed brune is better than a brush any day, and two good things can't spoil one another. I say, Phil, did you see in the papers that Jack Temple's run away with Ferrar's wife?"

"Never read the papers, my good fellow," said Danvers. "Froth in the leaders, gall in the debates, acid in the on dits, and flummery in the court news,

make an *olla podrida* that don't suit my digestion. Poor Jack! what could he be thinking of? She weighs nine stone, and is shockingly sallow in the daylight——”

Danvers stopped, the dogs gave tongue, the man handing the coffee round paused in his duty, Waverley looked up from his olives, Rockingham dropped half a dozen almond soufflées on to a terrier's nose, Erroll sprang from his chair: “My dear fellow! By Jove! how glorious!” And, as the groom of the chambers flung the door wide open, Strathmore entered his own dining-hall, unannounced and unexpected.

“Keep your seat, old fellow! You or I, what does it matter which?” he laughed, as he shook the Sabreur's hand, and forced him back into the chair at the head of the table, looking on his old Eton chum with a warmer glance than women had ever won from him, as the other men gathered round to greet him. “How are you all? Who's shockingly sallow by the daylight, Phil? Nobody you've brought down here, I hope, is it? Sit where you are, Bertie. I'm your guest to-night, *s'il vous plaît!*”

With which Strathmore, refusing to take the head of his table, and looking with eyes of love upon Erroll, sank into an empty chair, told the servants to bring him some soup, and sat down at White Ladies as though he had never left it. He had arrived only some half-hour before, but had gone straight up to his own room, forbidding the groom of the chambers to disturb the dinner-party by announcing his arrival.

"My dear old fellow, this *is* prime! How are you, Cis?" said Erroll, lying back to look at Strathmore with an unutterable satisfaction, fully content to give up his *pro tempore* ownership of White Ladies to see his friend back again.

"All right, old boy. You're astonished to see me to-night, Bertie?"

"By Jove I am! I thought you were at Baden?"

"I *was* at Baden. I only left on Tuesday, and shouldn't have left then but I had asked some people here, and given them *carte blanche* to fix their own time, and they fixed it at such a short notice, that I had only just days enough to come over to receive them. It wasn't worth while to write, as I should have come with the mail-bag."

"Are there any women coming?" asked Rockingham, with prophetic *pitié de soi-même*.

"Some. Why?"

"Nothing, only I hate the sex in September," muttered the unlucky victim to Valérie Brown and "that lot" in the shires. "So your Jack of Trumps colt didn't win the *Prix du Forêt Noir*?"

"No; only came a good third. I rode Starlight myself for the Rastatt; we did the distance very nicely."

"By Jove you did, and gave Ninette a dress of your colours, I saw in the *Post*. How's the pretty *bouquetière*?"

"Handsome as ever. She asked for you, Erroll; I don't think there's one of the Jockey Club who cuts

you out with her. She looked very charming in the scarlet and white. A poor devil of an Englishman shot himself on Monday night, after losing his last Nap, but all Baden was too occupied with Princesse Marie Volgarouski's desperate *engouement* of a young Tuscan composer to pay much attention. It's quite Pauline Bonaparte and Blangini over again. She's a striking looking woman, but I don't care for those Petersburg beauties, they're too olive."

"Ah, by George, Strath! you put me in mind," interrupted Erroll, with all the eagerness of a retriever scenting a wild duck—"you said you saw Lady Vavasour in Paris?"

"So I did."

"Well! What's she like? Have you seen her again?"

"Oh yes. She's been staying at Vernonçeaux."

"The deuce she has! and you never said so? What do you think of her—how do you like her—what style——?"

"My dear fellow, don't ask me to describe a woman!" interrupted Strathmore, indifferently. "They are like kaleidoscopes, and have a thousand phases, all pretty for the time, but never to be caught, and always changed when a new eye's on them."

"Hang you!" swore Erroll. "You wrote just enough to *intriguer* one about her, and now shove one off with an epigram! Come, *is* she the atrocious coquette they all say?"

"All women are coquettes, except plain ones, who make a virtue of a renunciation that's *de rigueur*, and hate their virtue (like most other people) while they brag of it!"

"Confound you! I don't ask about all women, only about one. You set out with a dreadful prejudice against her; you'd seen her at one masked ball, and wrote me word on the strength of it that you thought it particularly lucky that the Marquis was of elastic principles, and that you didn't envy him his wife, because her mouth, though perfection, would whisper too many infidelities to please you!"

A dark shadow of impatient, intolerant annoyance passed over Strathmore's face, and glanced into his eyes for an instant as the sun fell on it, slanting through the "**Slay! and spare not!**" of the motto blazoned on the painted panes; but there was no trace left of anger as he looked up and laughed slightly.

"I dare say it *is* particularly lucky the Marquis has elastic conjugal principles; it's lucky for any husband who has a handsome wife, and yet likes to live in peace with his brethren. Lady Vavasour is a very exquisite beauty, there's no disputing that; *you'll* rave of her, Bertie; at the same time, I never heard beauty reckoned as the best guarantee for marital fidelity!"

"The devil—not exactly!" said Scrope Waverley. "The Vavasour's the most abominable coquette—

shocking, on my honour, isn't she, Strathmore? Be warm as the tropics on you one minute, and cold as the poles the next."

Strathmore looked at him with his chilliest contempt:

"Perhaps you have suffered! Acrimony generally bespeaks adversity. Not having been the subject of her ladyship's caprices, I cannot compare notes with you, Scrope, nor yet back your experience, though—in your case—I don't doubt any part of them, except that you ever basked much in the tropics!"

Waverley looked sulky as he picked over his olives, not quite certain how to take the shot that had told in a very sore spot; while Erroll, ever good natured, and who could no more take pleasure in making a man smart than a dog wince, turned the subject, and postponing his own curiosity, asked Strathmore who the people were that were coming?

"Who? Oh, some of the Vernonçaux set," answered Strathmore, taking a Manilla out of the little silver waggon. "The De Ruelles, the Beaudeserts, Madame de Cevillac, your old friend Lady Camelot, and—Lady Vavasour."

He paused a moment before he added her name, but then spoke it indifferently enough.

"The Vavasour!" echoed Erroll and all the other men with him. "By Jove! Strath, you don't mean it!"

"Why should I not mean it?"

"The Vavasour? By Heaven!" ejaculated the

Sabreur, stroking his moustache in beatified astonishment. "I thought you didn't like her, Cis?"

"I don't think I ever said so? *De plus*, she invited herself, and reigning beauties are like reigning fashions—one must obey them."

"Does the Marquis come too?"

"God forbid! At least, he comes for a day or two, but only en route to the Sprudel to cure his dyspepsia. Like the Roman, he goes to a bath that he may come back for a banquet."

"And leaves his wife a *droit de chasse* in his absence?" laughed Erroll. "But the idea of keeping that to yourself all this time, letting us talk of her and never telling us! What an odd fellow you are! You called her a sorceress, and said she tried her wiles on you at the Luilhiers's ball. Has she bewitched even *you*, old fellow?"

"Not exactly!" said Strathmore—his tone was more contemptuously cold than he had ever used to Erroll—"but I like beauty as I like a good Titian, a good claret, a good opera, a good racer. Who doesn't? To hear you, Bertie, one would certainly think no woman had ever been entertained at White Ladies since Mary Stuart! If Lady Vavasour wished to come here with Beatrix Beaudesert, could I say I wouldn't have her? Besides, I had no wish to say so; she is very charming. By-the-by, Phil, who was that you were talking about when I came in? Who's swallow in the daylight?—most blondes are that, though, after twenty."

He spoke so carelessly, as he lay back in his chair, that not a man present guessed that the name of Marion Vavasour was anything more to him than the names of fifty fair women, who had been, season after season, recipients of the stately hospitalities of White Ladies: except, indeed, Erroll, who looked at him with a puzzled look clouding his clear azure eyes, and drank his coffee in silence. He, the sworn Squire of Dames, who worshipped everything feminine that crossed his path, felt a vague dislike rise up in him against this witching beauty, whom Strathmore denied had had charm for him, and yet who was bidden beneath the roof of White Ladies.

That night, when they had left the smoking-room, Strathmore, sitting alone in his own room, thoughtful yet listless, with a restless indifference which had grown on him of late, and which he had vainly doctored with very heavy betting at Baden, and dangerous *coups de hasard* at roulette, threw open his despatch-box and took out a little note—a note which was not very many lines, which placed his title before his name, and which was chiefly gay, mischievous badinage and pretty command, with but here and there touches of something deeper; and these only deepened to friendship. Yet this letter had sufficed to bring him from Baden at its bidding; it had been looked at many times, where no other note addressed to him had ever served for any other purpose than to light his cigar, and it had a fascination for him which no words written by a woman's

hand had ever claimed, for it was signed—"Marion Vavasour and Vaux." Letters have a strange glamour!—with this, the sweet mocking voice echoed in his ear, the smile of the dark antelope eyes laughed into his, the fragrance of the amber hair floated past him, and he flung the note back into its resting-place with a fierce oath—he hated the senseless paper! For he hated the hot, insidious passion that was creeping into his blood, and that, in night and solitude, wreathed round him as the serpent folds round the Läocoon, sapping his strength, and only twisting closer and closer with each effort to thrust it aside; the passion that would make him the slave of a woman, the vassal of a smile, the bond-servant of a kiss!

In the simplest trifles Strathmore was remarkable for an unswerving tenacity to truth, too proud a man not to hold his word his bond even in ordinary colloquial intercourse; yet that night, when denying to Erroll that she had any sway over him, he had for the only time in his life *lied*. It was the first trivial unnoticed step of the downward course that he was even now commencing, as the first unperceived loosening of the snow is the signal for the downward sweep of the avalanche.

Marion Vavasour had a power over him such as no woman had ever gained before her; the strange force with which absolute hatred of her mingled with the charm her beauty had for him, served only to heighten it and give it a sting which excited and enthralled a

man whom a tamer or wiser love would never have governed. Strathmore had stayed on at Vernon-œaux, voluntarily remaining in the danger, which a weaker man would, or might, at least, have fled from while there was yet time ; finding in this new beguilement, this woman's intoxicating loveliness, a spell, subtle and resistless, the same dazzling, sensuous delight as lies in a soft Bacchante of Coustou's golden chisel, or a voluptuous *rêveuse* warm with the rich varied colours of the canvas of Greuze. Constantly in her society, meeting her alone in the freshness of the early morning, strolling with her at evening under the trellised roofing of the vines, bowing to the sway of her coquettishness in the salon where she held her gay omnipotent reign, Strathmore did not dispute the “destiny” which she had said had decreed them to be friends.

For him, too, she had her most certain and most dangerous charm : capricious, mutable, scattering her coquettishness *à pleines mains*, as the Hours of Corregio scatter their roses ; she had a softness, a sadness, a tenderness, *I call it*—*she* termed it a “friendship”—for and with Strathmore which seemed to bespeak that something warmer than vanity, something deeper than mere pride of conquest, might be awakened in her. Amidst the largesse of adoration that she levied from all who came within sight of her brilliant banner, which fluttered with its audacious motto, “*Je règne partout*,” from north to south, from east to west, she made a distinction towards the man who

had saved her life at the Vigil of St. John, which gave good ground for attributing a preference that every man, from Monsignore Villaflôr downwards, bitterly envied him as they began to yield place to him as of necessity, and to couple his name with hers in the card-room or smoking-room, when neither he nor the Marquis were present. The latter was the only one at Vernonçaux who never troubled his head which way his Marchioness's caprices might be turning; it was a matter of profound indifference to him, and he dozed, and read French novels, and played écarté, and discussed *l'art de goûт*, and let his wife go on her own ways, like a gentleman of breeding who did as he would be done by.

Half hating her, half beguiled by her, one hour accrediting to her all the velvet treachery, the wanton cruelty of the panther; the next, subdued by that charm which he had little wish and less will to resist; one instant, bitterly contemptuous on the witchery that made his pulse beat quicker at the mere fragrance of a woman's hair; another seeking with all the skill the world had taught him, to make the softened glance of her eyes deepen into tenderness;—so the golden shuttle of a woman's power had woven its woof and wound its web around Strathmore, and so he had courted, even while he rebelled from, its enchanted toils. And just at the very moment when the surest meshes of its twisted threads were entangling round him, when he was first beginning to feel it a necessity to be in her presence—just then, Lady

Vavasour left Vernonçaux. Without announcement, without preparation, she went; carefully avoiding any *tête-à-tête* farewell, bidding him “*au revoir*” with laughing negligence in a crowded salon, with an indifference which Strathmore was not slow to simulate in imitation. Yet that adieu, by its very avoidance of him, by its very abandonment of that *tendresse* which she used as her habitual weapon of war, told him, by his experience of women, might equally mean one of two things: that she felt nothing, or—felt too much! *Which?*

The question was left open, and pursued him ceaselessly; nothing in his life had ever haunted him so persistently as that single doubt. I believe that weeks, months spent in her presence, would not have rooted her in his memory so firmly as that well-timed absence, that insoluble uncertainty. Away from her, it was in vain that he contemned, as he did with bitter irony, with pitiless rancour, her coquettices and her caprices; or mercilessly dissected her faults, her foibles, and her fascinations: her power had begun! *Insecurity* is to passion as the wind to the flame—without the cold breeze wafted to it, the embers would have faded fast, and never flared up into life; with the rush of the cooler air the fire leaps into flame, and its lust is not sated till it has destroyed all before it.

The Strathmores of White Ladies had never loved the women who had slept innocently on their hearts, and laid their pure lives within their keeping; the

only passion that had ever roused them had been some fierce forbidden desire, and the guilty leaven of the dead race was alive in the man who bore their name and their features. From Vernonçaux Strathmore went to Baden, and if any feeling was strong in him towards the woman whose beauty, when the scarlet flowers bound her amber hair, had made him think of Frédégonde, of Sifrid, of Lucrezia, of every living Circe who had drawn men downward by the witching gleam of her white arms till they lost all likeness of themselves, and sank into an abyss whence they could never more rise again into the pure light left for ever at her bidding, he would have said, and perhaps said rightly, that it was—hatred. If pity be akin to love, believe me passion is as often allied to hate! It would slay what it vainly covets; if it cannot kiss the lips it woos, it would blur them out of all beauty by a blow; what it seeks so fiercely, it loathes for the pain of its own unslaked desire; and what it is forbidden to enjoy, it would thrust away out of its own and other eyes, into the darkness of an absolute or of a living death, with the hatred of Amnon, to the tomb of Héloïse!

Such was the passion now wakening in Strathmore; which, whilst it made him hate the woman who fascinated and blinded him, because he knew that the softness of such hours as that upon the rose-terrace was but a more fatal phase of her brilliant and studied coquettices, were but the shadows which, with a cun-

ning art, she threw in to heighten a dazzling picture ; had still made him leave Baden the instant that the note he now flung aside had reached him—the note which accepted his invitation afresh, and selected White Ladies from amidst a hundred other places that were open to the honour of her ladyship's bright and sovereign presence.

In his own room that night he read over the delicate fragrant letter that had made him leave Baden (and would have made him leave Paradise !), and with an oath threw it away from him, as though it were tainted with poison. He hated the mad fool's delight that lay in it for him because her hand had touched it, yet he longed with ungovernable desire to feel that hand lie once more within his own ; and Strathmore, who held that he could mould his life like plastic clay into any shape that pleased him, did not seek to inquire whether the clay would break or harden in the fire which was beginning to seethe and coil around it.

As he flung the letter away and rose, he pulled back the curtains of the window nearest him, and threw one of its casements open. He felt impatient for the air, impatient with himself, intolerant with all the world ! The night was very hot, and he stood looking out for a while into the moonlight. The scene was lovely enough, and the old monastic lands, as far as he could see, were his own ; but Strathmore, absorbed in his own thoughts, looked little at the

landscape. It was a mere hazard that the figure of a man crossing the turf caught his eye.

"A poacher as near the house as that; impossible! That Knightswood gang *are* the very deuce for audacity, but even they'd never——" he thought, as he leaned out to get a good look at the intruder; in the clear white light the form, though distant, was distinct enough, and the red end of a cigar, as it moved through the gloom, sparkled like a glow-worm.

Strathmore looked hard at the mysterious shadow, till it had gone out of the moonlight into the deep shade of a cluster of elms.

"By Jove! Erroll, as I live! Another of my tenants' daughters come to grief, I suppose! What a fellow it is; if he's away from Phya of the Bijou Villa, he takes up with Phyllis of the Home-farm! I wonder how cider tastes, faulting champagne? Rather flat, and terribly homely, I should fancy; better than nothing, though, I suppose, for the Sabreur. Well, it's a very nice night for an erotic adventure. Byron's quite right—

The devil's in the moon for mischief;
. there is not a day,
The longest, not the twenty-first of June,
Sees half the business in a wicked way
On which three single hours of moonshine smile—
And then she looks so modest all the while!

He might have said, too, that in that respect the women who make the mischief are like the moon that

looks on it! Chaste Diana of the skies, or of the sex, only veils that she may lend herself—to something naughty!"

With which reflection Strathmore shut the window down and rang for his Albanian, giving no more thought to Erroll's moonlight errand. Long afterwards, when it formed a link in that chain which his own passions forged about his life, the remembrance of this September night came back to him.

CHAPTER XIV.

FEATHERY SEEDS THAT WERE FREIGHTED WITH
FRUIT OF THE FUTURE.

"IT was a fine moonlight night last night, my dear fellow, and Hampshire 'moonrakers' do go fishing after contraband goods, *au clair de la lune*, but I didn't know *you* belonged to the fraternity, Bertie," said Strathmore, the next evening, as they walked home brushing through the ferns, after a good day out in the open.

Erroll turned with a certain dismay; though in the teeth of a convicted wickedness he would stroke his moustache with the blandest *plait-il?* look of innocence, he was thrown a little off his guard, and confidence was such a habit with him with Strathmore, that it was difficult to get out of it.

"The deuce, Strath, you're as bad as a detective!" he murmured, plaintively. "Where did you see me?"

"Where you were very easily to be seen, my dear

fellow, as I told you once before. If you walk about in the open air, as large as life, with a cigar in your mouth, I can't understand how you can very judiciously expect to go *unseen*, myself ! What have you got about you, Erroll, to confer invisibility ? You seem to expect it as your prerogative ! ”

“ Bosh ! ” interrupted Bertie, striking a fusee. “ But, by the way, my dear Cis, how came *you* to be looking at the moonlight last night ? That isn’t your line at all.”

“ Thank God, no ! Who will may have the moon-rays for me : we can spend the night much more pleasantly than by looking at it ! Who is she, mon cher ? Such nocturnal depredations are poaching on my manor-rights ; however, I don’t grudge them to you. Katie or Jeanneton may make a very pretty picture with a broken pitcher or a gleaner’s bundle for Mulready or Meissonnier, but in real life—no, thank you ! No Psyche can lie on a hard pallet under a thatched roof. Bah ! I thought better of you, Sabreur ! ”

Erroll laughed and didn’t defend himself, but he looked a trifle thoughtful and worried for so insignificant an affair as a provincial *amourette*, which to that universal conqueror was usually something what knocking over a swallow with a stone, might be to a splendid shot, after the best bouquets of prime battues.

“ Don’t say anything about it, there’s a good old fellow ! ” he said, carelessly, after a moment’s pause—

a pause apparently of some hesitation and indecision on a subject on which he seemed tempted to speak fully.

“Did I say anything about the other, last summer? If I were a man, now, who liked cabbage-roses, I should try my *droits de seigneur*, and turn you out from your monopoly. But on my life, Bertie, I don’t understand your village liaisons,” went on Strathmore, thinking no more about the matter than that Erroll’s equal worship of Eros, whether the little god of mischief lived under a lean-to roof, or a ceiling painted after Fragonard, was not his own line of action, and seemed an unintelligible elasticity of taste. “‘A Gardener’s Daughter’ and ‘Jacqueline la Bouquetière’ look very well in poetry and painting; so do rags and tatters; but, in real life, I can no more fancy making love to them, than taking to a beggar’s clothes by choice. Love’s born of the senses; then why the deuce take Love where half his senses must be shocked?”

“*L’amour est niveleur!*” laughed Erroll, a little more absent still than usual. “He’s the only real republican, the only sincere socialist going, my dear Cis; he won’t complain where you take him so long as he has a soft nest in a white breast, and can talk in his own tongue! What do you know about him? You only ‘make love’ languidly to some *grande dame*, who blinds him with sandal-wood and stifles him in lace; or some Champs Elysées Aspasia, who drenches his wings with *vin mosseux*, smothers him in

cachemires, kills him with *mots*, and sells him for *rouleaux*! Your god isn't *the god*!"

"My dear fellow, will you tell me in what religion my god is ever *the god* according to my neighbour's orthodoxy?" said Strathmore. "I say, Bertie, didn't you lose a good deal at the Spring Meetings? I told you that miserable bay was worth nothing."

Erroll laughed gaily.

"I did drop a good deal, but I cleared a few hundreds after at Goodwood, that put things a little square. Things always right themselves: worry's like a woman, who, if she sees she's no effect, leaves off plaguing you. Bills, like tears, are rained down on you if they disturb you an inch, but, if you're immovable to both, you see no more of either!"

"Comfortable creed! I never knew, though, that the unpaid and the unloved were quite so soon daunted! But, Bertie, you promised me that—that if—"

"My dear old fellow, I know I did!" broke in the Sabreur. "If I were in any mess for money, I would tell you frankly, and take from you as cheerfully as you'd lend—"

"Parole d'honneur?"

"Parole d'honneur! Won't that satisfy you?"

"No! I want to free you from those beggarly Jews. You might let me have my own whim here. Name any interest to me you like—a hundred per cent., if that will please you—but only—"

"Sign a bond that you'd tear in two and scatter to

the winds, or thrust in the fire as soon as it was written ! You served me that trick once," muttered Erroll ; but his eyes grew soft with a grateful and cordial light as he looked at Strathmore. " Old fellow, you *know* how I thank you ; but I can't let you have your whim here, though you're as true as steel, Strath, God bless you ! I say, what does Paris think of Graziella ? She's not worth half they rave of her in the Guards' Box, and her ankles are so atrociously thick ! "

" The deuce they are ! She owes everything to her face ; her *pas de seul* would never be borne in public, only she's so extremely handsome for a *pas de deux* in private ! Carlotta has ten times more grace ; but Carlotta got a *claque* against her from the first ; she began by being—virtuous, and, though she's seen the error of her ways, the imprudence will never be forgiven her. Virtue is as detrimental in the Coulisses as Honesty on 'Change ! The professors of either soon get hissed down for such an eccentric innovation, and tire of its losing game before the sibilation ! "

With which truism upon Life and Virtue, Strathmore walked on through the ferns, talking with Erroll of the topics of the hour, from the *carte* of the coming policies of Europe, to the best site for a new tan-gallop. That evening, as they strolled home-wards in the mellow sunset, smoking and chatting, while Our Lady's bells chimed slowly and softly over woodland and cornland, over river and valley, in the

Curfew chant, was the last hour in which they enjoyed, untainted, the free, frank, *bon camarade* communion of a friendship that was closer than brotherhood and stronger than the tie of blood. It was the last before a woman laid the axe to its root.

And even now their conversation lagged, and their voices dropped to silence, as the thoughts of both were occupied by her whom neither named—Erroll musing with an impatient curiosity, a prophetic prescience of distrust, on this sorceress-beauty which men attributed to the Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux, yet which his friend averred had assailed him no more than the lifeless perfection of some Titian *chef-d'œuvre*; and Strathmore thinking of the hour, now near, when her hand should touch his, when the light of her eyes should glance on him again, when his own roof should shelter the loveliness which was fast shattering to the dust the proud panoply of his chill philosophies, and whose seductive sweetness had stolen into his life unperceived, from the first night that he had looked by the light of the spring stars on the *blonde aux yeux noirs* in Bohemia.

That evening Lady Vavasour drove through Paris; she had been staying with the Court at Compiègne, and was here but for a day or two in her favourite residence, which was peerless among cities as herself amidst womanhood. She and Paris both brilliant, sparkling, proud, without rival in their path, with their days one brilliant *fête de triomphe*, and their sovereign

sceptre wreathed with flowers, suited and resembled each other—the Queen of Cities and the Queen of Fashion! And if in the Past and Future of the woman, as in the Past and Future of the city, there were cruelties which teemed with the ferocity of the tigress, lustful vanities which rioted with the licence of a Faustina, dark hours in which the Discrowned tasted of the bitterness of death, with both the Past was shrouded, and the Future veiled.

Paris, fair and stately, lay glittering in the sunset, with its myriad of lights a-lit, its song, its revels, its music; and Marion Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux drove through the streets, her moqueur smile upon her lips, her silken lashes lazily drooped as she mused over a thousand victorious memories, her delicate form wrapped in costliest silks and laces, the very crowds doing homage to her as she passed through them, and they turned into the streets to glance after the loveliest woman of her day.

The carriage with its fretting roans, its mazarine-blue liveries, its outriders *à la Reine*,—for she passed through Paris with well-nigh as much pomp and circumstance as Montespan or Marie Antoinette,—halted before the doors of her hotel, and the people thronging on their way to the Boulevards and the Cafés-chantants, turned to gaze at the superb equipage, and more at the loveliness which lay back upon its cushions, negligently indifferent to their gaze.

Among the crowd was a woman, a gipsy, at whom

a Quartier Latin student, who lived on a pipe and three *litre* a day, and dreamt of high art when he was not drunk with absinthe, looked, thinking ruefully what a model she would have made had he had a sou to give her; for as the double light of the sunset and the *réverbères* fell on her, her vagrant dress was Rembrandtesque, and her olive features had the dark, still, melancholy beauty of an Arab's—that mournful and immutable calm which Greek sculptors gave to the face of Destiny and of the god Demeter, and which on the living countenance ever bespeaks repressed but concentrated passions. And this woman, mingling among the passengers that thronged the trottoir, drew nearer and nearer the carriage as it stopped before the Hôtel Vavasour.

The horses pawed the ground impatient, the outriders pulled theirs up with noise and fracas, the Chasseur lowered the steps, and Lady Vavasour descended from her carriage, sweeping onwards with her royal, negligent grace, the subtle perfume of her dress wafted out upon the evening air. The Bohemian had drawn near; so near, that as she stretched forward this vagrant obstructed the path of the English peeress, and her heavy, weather-stained cloak, covered with the dust of the streets, all but touched the scented gossamer laces and trailing train of the Leader of Fashion!

“*Chassez-là !*” said Marion Vavasour to her Chasseur, as she slightly drew back;—she, for whom

sovereigns laid down their state, and before whose word bowed princes of the blood, to have her passage blocked by a beggar-woman !

The Chasseur, obedient, struck the gipsy a sharp blow with his long white wand, and ordered her out of the way.

She fell out of the path, and Lady Vavasour went onward up the steps of her hotel, and passed at once to her own rooms to make, still more elaborately than usual, her dinner toilette—S. A. R. le Prince d'Etoile and his Eminence the Cardinal Miraflora dined with her that night, and ere bringing down royal stags she loved to know that all her weapons were primed and burnished. As she sank into her couch, and resigned herself into the hands of her maids, she tossed carelessly over the hundred notes that had collected in her absence, and were heaped together on a Louis-Quinze salver, chased by Réveil; she glanced at this, threw that carelessly aside, till she had dismissed dozens, scarce reading a line; at last over one she paused, with amused triumph glancing away the languor from her eyes, and a smile playing on her lips—a smile of success; while as she looked up from the letter to the face reflected in the mirror before her, the thought that floated through her mind was a fatal truth :

“ My cold, proud Strathmore, who dared to disdain the power of woman!—you own it now, then, at last !”

And underneath the windows of her stately hotel the Bohemian still lingered, as though loth to leave

the place, while the crowds brushed past her, and the carriage and the outriders swept away. When the blow of the Chasseur had struck her, and he had ordered her out of his path like a cur, the fixed, immutable melancholy of her face had not changed : she had spoken no word, made no sign, only her teeth had set tightly, and the light as of a flame had leaped for one moment into her eyes ; this had been all. She lingered some moments longer, while the rush of the throngs jostled and moved her unnoticed : then she passed slowly away, walking wearily and painfully, with her head bowed, as the daylight faded, and the gas in the lamps glared brighter ; while amidst the gay babble and the busy noise of Paris, her lips muttered to herself in the mellow Czeschen patois of her people :

“ My beloved ! my beloved ! Redempta has not forgot thee, Redempta will yet avenge thee ! Her hireling struck me, at her bidding, like a dog—*that* was not needed *too*. Patience !—the lowliest stone may serve to bring to earth the loftiest bird that soars !”

CHAPTER XV.

THE CHARM OF THE ROSE.

“She is divine—but she will destroy him!”

They were uncomplimentary words, and very harsh ones, for that devout adorer of the beau sexe; but as Erroll stood leaning against the doorway of the portrait-gallery at White Ladies, and looking down it to its farthest end, where Lady Vavasour was seated, while Strathmore bent towards her, on the morning after her arrival, a jealousy towards this woman stirred in a heart which never harboured any acrid thought or unjust envy to any living thing.

Is a man ever leniently disposed towards the woman whom his friend loves? Very rarely. She is his rival, and in lists, moreover, in which he can oppose nothing to her power. She supplants him, she invades his supremacy, fifty to one she is the cause of dispute between them; and he will see no good in

this soft-skinned intruder, this dangerous Nazarene : unless he does what is worse—fall in love with her too !

And Erroll twisted his moustaches, and muttered to himself the first unflattering and mistrustful words that he had ever uttered of a lovely woman, Bertie being generally given to deny at all odds that the Ceinture could ever strangle ; or the “Drink to me with thine eyes !” ever be an invitation to a cup of poisoned wine. Yet what he looked at was matchless, and dazzled his eyes even while he swore against it.

“Hate her!”—the germ of hatred might lie in it, but all of impatience and aversion, that had crossed and checked the witchery she had for Strathmore, were swept away the moment that he touched her hand and received her beneath his own roof. She came—the beauty of Paris, the Queen of Fashion—where before her Mary Stuart had languished a captive, and in ages yet farther the ascetic Dominicans had dwelt, thrusting away from them, with the throes of an unnatural struggle, the mere thought, the mere memory, of her sex. She came to White Ladies with the rest of a gay, dashing, fashionable party from his favourite Paris set ; and the advent of Royalty could not have been received there with more splendour than was the Sovereign of the Salons. The State chambers were given to her, where the White Queen and the Winter Queen had closed their soft Stuart eyes in slumber before her, and where none save crowned heads till now had been laid.

The witchery of this woman was on him, and to lend éclat and honour to her I believe Strathmore would have dissolved pearls in his wines, or scattered diamonds à *pleines mains*. He did not realise it; told it, he would not perhaps have believed even yet; but the web woven by the golden shuttle was drawing its charmed toils tighter and tighter about him, and he was fast becoming the slave of Marion Vavasour: doubt had but bound him closer, absence had but riveted her chains; and Lady Vavasour laughed softly to herself when on the night of her arrival she drew her hands through her amber tresses, as she leant her head on her arm and looked at her face in the mirror, thinking, “My cold Strathmore! you are *my captive now!*”

Was it love that she felt for him which set her heart so strongly on this triumph? It is as easy to follow the wayward flight of a bird on the wing, or an April wind’s wanton vagaries as it blows over field and flower, as to sift the reasons of a woman’s will —of a coquette’s caprices!

“That is your best friend, Major Erroll, isn’t it?” she asked Strathmore, when they stood together in the deep embrasured window of the picture-gallery her eyes glancing at the Sabreur, where he leaned against the doorway.

“My best indeed! You have been introduced to him?”

“Oh yes, you introduced me last night. I was anxious to see the only person out of the whole world

to whom you are not indifferent ! What charm has he about him ? ”

“ What charm ? Dear old fellow ! None, save the gentlest nature and truest honour that I ever found in any man. He has the strength of a lion and the sweetness of a woman ; he is game to the backbone, and frank as a boy ! ”

She raised her eyebrows. She was a little impatient of the warmth of his tone and the sincerity of his praise ; a tyrannous, victorious woman is jealous of all influence not her own ; and perhaps she foresaw here a power that might be opposed to hers. Lady Vavasour, with a woman’s swift, unerring instinct, guessed that Erroll would be against her, in exact proportion to the sway she exercised over his friend.

“ You admiring warmth of heart and the candour of boyhood, Strathmore,” she said, maliciously enough. “ Why don’t you cultivate them, mon ami, if you think them so admirable ? ”

At her tone all the strange, sudden hatred of her, which now and then flashed so ominously across the passion which was growing on him for this woman, stirred into life afresh for a moment ; he smiled slightly, the smile which made his face sneeringly cold, and gave his eyes the look that, in a dog or a horse, we call *dangerous*.

“ I am an Athenian, Lady Vavasour : I may admire what I fail to practise. Life makes us all egotists and dissemblers ; but we may honour the nature which is such true steel that it resists and

escapes the corroding. Erroll's is the only one *I* know which has done so."

Her impatience at Erroll increased. With the quick wit of her sex, she saw at once that Erroll would undermine her power if she did not undermine his, and she changed her tactics accordingly. She looked at the Sabreur, letting her lashes droop over her eyes, and lend them that glance of softened interest which was the most delicate flattery such eyes could bestow.

"I can believe it; his face tells one so. How singularly beautiful a face it is, too; a woman might envy him his golden hair and his azure eyes!"

And for the first time in his life, as he stood beside her—not for the praise of his personal attractions, such petty vanity and envy Strathmore was far above—but for the softness of her look as it dwelt on him, the softness which with imperious jealousy he loathed to see wake for any save himself, an ill-feeling stirred in him towards the man whom he loved closer than a brother. And Lady Vavasour glanced at him and smiled, amused and content; she had sown the larvæ of the cankerworm that would eat away friendship! It is a work at which the hands of women ever love well to be busy.

She had done enough to please her, and with one of her graceful, antelope-like movements she turned and looked upward at the portrait above her.

"Ah! a Vandyke and a Strathmore. Really you are wonderfully like one of those old pictures animated

into life, Lord Cecil! My lord is quite right; he says you are a walking Velasquez. There are the eyes, ‘fathomless and darkly-wise,’ of the legend; you have them and the portrait has them; and in both they never soften, even to a woman!”

As she spoke, her own glanced at him with their most enchanting mischief, and Strathmore, subdued to the charm of her will, bent towards her:

“Looking down on *you*, the very portraits of the dead might soften their glance. How then shall any living man have power to resist? Have you not heard that the Strathmores of White Ladies have often disdained all, only as their doom, to madly and vainly covet—one?”

And it was as he whispered those words that Erroll, not catching even the sound of his voice, but seeing the meaning warmth upon his face, the gaze which Strathmore fastened on her, muttered, *sotto voce*, “She is divine; but she will destroy him!”

Into him, too, entered—with a nature as different to Strathmore’s as the summer to the winter, as the sunny unruffled lake to the deep and silent sea—the subtle poison of Marion Vavasour’s beauty, mingled with a warning and prophetic hatred of her power.

There was a large party gathered by this time at the Abbey, and the hospitalities she had recently quitted of a Bourbon at Neuilly had scarcely been more brilliant than those which welcomed her at White Ladies. There was Blanche de Ruelle, that

haughty dark-eyed beauty, who, amidst all the homage she received, treasured bitterly and wearily the memory of the love once whispered by a man whom no love had touched—who was now her friend and her host. There was Beatrix Beaudesert, that dashing *brunette* who led the first flight in a twenty minutes' burst up wind, and never funk'd at any bullfinch or double that yawned in good Northamptonshire; but could have cleared Brixworth Brook, and won the Grand Military, were the sex allowed to enter either for the Steeple Chase or the Service. There was the Comtesse de Chantâl, who wove half the intrigues of the Tuilleries, while statesmen and diplomatists wound her floss silks, and who brewed *embroglie* for the Western Powers in her dainty Sèvres coffee-cup. There was pretty Lady Alaric, who was so very religious, and went on her knees before her missal-like prayer-book before she floated down to breakfast to commence the flirtations, which always pulled up *just* short of a court and a co-respondent; of an error and an esclandre. There was Lady Clarence Camelot, leader of the most exclusive of the thorough-bred sets, who was cold and still as a rock-crystal, and proud as any angel that ever fell by that queenly sin; but whose nature was sweet as the sun of Sorrento, and whose heart was as mellow as a Catherine pear, for the few who had the fortunate sesame to either. There were these and others at White Ladies, but Lady Vavasour outshone them all: she

was the Reine Regnante, and she used her sceptre omnipotently, and far eclipsed those whom most women found it a hard matter even to equal.

The Marquis—who came thither, *en route* to Spa, for a few days, chiefly because the venison and the char out of White Ladies' woods and waters had had such a celebrity for centuries that he was curious to test their reputed superiority—was blessed with the most gentlemanlike indifference to his lovely wife's vagaries. He knew she was always flirting with somebody—*who*, didn't matter much; perhaps when he did think about it, his chief feeling was a certain malicious pleasure in seeing so many of his fellow-creatures chained, and worried, and fooled, by the seductive tormentress whom he had let loose on the world, with her *droit de conquête* legitimatised by his coronet. The Marquis was a philosopher, and the very husband for his wife: their marital relations were admirably ordered for the preservation of peace and friendship; they saw little or nothing of one another (the secret recipe for conjugal unity), and, by mutual consent, never interfered, he with her *caprices de cœur*, nor she with his “separate establishments.” When he had first married, people had said his lordship was madly *entêté* with his bride; but that inconvenient folly had departed with a few months' wear: and now—he was proud of her loveliness, but wisely and placably negligent on whom that loveliness might shine; a wisdom and a pla-

bility never more needed, perhaps, than now at White Ladies.

“Lookest thou at the stars?
If I were Heaven, with all the eyes of Heaven,
Would I look down on thee!”

The words were very softly whispered, as Strathmore stood that evening on the terrace. It was late; the stars were shining, and the murmur of the waters flowing onward under the elm-woods was heard plaintively and monotonously sweet, as Marion Vavasour, whose whim was every hour changing, and who laughed at all feeling one hour, only to assume it most beguilingly the next, left the drawing-rooms, where she reigned supreme; and strolled out for a brief while in the summer night, followed by her host. The white light of the stars fell about her, glancing on the sapphires and diamonds that glittered in her hair or sparkled in her bosom, and shone in the depths of her eyes, as she raised them, and looked upwards at the skies above, where, here and there, some cloud of transparent mist trailed across the brilliance of the moon, or veiled the swift course of a falling star. She laughed, toying with the closed autumn roses that twined round the balustrade.

“Strathmore! you would do no such thing! If you had the eyes of Heaven, they would all be bent in watching conferences you cannot join, and in reading despatches you cannot see! There are three things no woman rivals with a man who loves any

one of them ; they are a Horse, a State secret, and a Cigar. We may eclipse all three, perhaps, for a little while, but, in the long run, any one of the triad outrivals us."

He bent lower towards her, with a soft whisper :

" Do not slander my sex, and belie the power of your own. Have there not been women for whom men have thought the world itself well lost ? "

" There have been fools, mon ami ; and that is how *you* would phrase it if you were out of my presence and in the smoking-room, and anybody advanced the proposition !" she laughed, with that *moquer* incredulity with which at Vernonçeaux she had so constantly tantalised and provoked him.

" Fools ? It would be rash to call them so. Manuel was no fool, yet he found his Isles of Delight sweeter than the din and clash of triumph, and the fall of conquered citadels. Alcibiades was no fool, yet he found to look into the eyes of Aspasia better than the sceptre of the Alcmœonidæ and the wisdom of the Schools ! "

Three months ago Strathmore would have sworn never to utter such words, save in derision : but now, as he stooped towards her in the stillness of the night, it was not either in jest or flattery, that he spoke them ; the roses had the perfume for him with which they had wooed Manuel in the Isles of Delight ; the eyes had the power to which the soft Greek had bowed and sunk. For with every year the roses bloom, and with every age men love !

Her sweet mocking laugh rang in the air—the laugh which had enthralled him under the lindens of Bohemia, and from behind the mask of the White Domino.

“*What!* you who acknowledge but one love—Power; and covet but one boon—Age; confess so much as that! You must be very suddenly changed since three months ago; your eyes, a Strathmore’s fathomless eyes, actually soften at the mere memory of Aspasia!”

Her eyes laughed up into his, her hand touched his own where it wandered among the roses; the sultry air of the night swept round them, only stirred by the dreamy splash of fountains, and the rise and fall of her low breathings. He had no strength against her in such a moment, nor did he seek, or strive, or wish, to have.

“Changed? If I be so, the sorcery lies at your door. It is not the memory of Aspasia which evokes the confession; the daughter of Hellas has bequeathed her glamour to one who uses it to the full, as fatally, and as surely!”

A smile trembled on her lovely lips, which became half a sigh, while her hand absently toyed with the sapphire cross that glittered just below her throat.

“Ah-bah!” she said, with a laugh, whose gay mockery had in it for the first time a *timbre* of constraint, as of lightness assumed but unfelt. “I do not believe in such sudden converts; I do not receive them into my creed! Strathmore, am I,

who read you so well while you were yet unknown, likely to believe in your suave words so quickly ? Remember ! I am clairvoyante. I know the sincerity of every one who approaches me, and I know the worth of your words, my diplomatist ! I shall be a very long time before I accord to you the honour of any belief in them."

"If you be clairvoyante, you will no longer disbelieve ; you will see without words what your sorcery works. You must know your own power too well to doubt it !"

Know her own power ? In every iota ! and she knew it now ; knew that this man, who was steeled in his own strength, and held himself far above the soft foolery of passion, was fast bending to her will, fast drinking in the draught which she tendered to his lips, fast succumbing to her feet, to lie there, bound, and powerless, to free himself from bondage ; letting his life drift on as she should choose to guide it ; losing all, forsaking all, risking all, so long as he could look upward in her eyes, so long as her white hand would wander to his own ! Know her own power ! Truly she did, and used it without mercy, without scruple !

Her eyes looked up and dwelt on his with the mournful languor which gave to their dark brilliance the softness as of unshed tears ; the mockery of her smile faded ; and the lips seemed charged with some unuttered whisper, as the roses she toyed, were charged with the heavy sweetness of the clinging dew. If

ever woman loved, Strathmore could have sworn she loved him then; and the scorching sweetness, the dangerous delight of a forbidden passion, stole over him, and swept round him, in the sultry air of the night, only heightened by the strange hatred of the power which enthralled him to her will, which ever mingled with the madness that was stealing on him. He bent towards her, his breath fanned her hair, his hand touched hers where it rested among the flowers, and touched—the diamond circlet that chilled him as with the chill of ice. It recalled to him that this woman was but fooling him; that this woman was Marion Vavasour! And as their hands met, she drew her own away; while a faint sigh stirred her heart beneath its costly lace.

“Hush! If they be not the words of flattery, they must not be the words of friendship! How beautiful the night is! I do not wonder that poets love it better than the day. The sunlight is for haste and care, and for men’s toil and labour, and for the fret of daily life; but the night, when the flowers are closed, and the cities are silent, and the stars look into the chambers, where the living sleep peacefully as the dead, and shine upon the rivers, till the suicides who have sought their refuge wear a calm smile on their cold lips—the Night is the noon of the poets—the Night is for rest, for dreams, for——”

“*Love!*”

The word which paused upon her lips he uttered for her; and the soft rebuke, the gesture with which

she repelled him, and recalled to him that there was a boundary which the language of homage must not pass, to the woman who was a wife, enthralled him more than any art she could have called forward, since in his ear it whispered :

“ The woman who fears your homage, fears herself ! ”

As she spoke dreamily, mournfully, with that occasional earnestness which, when it succeeded her caprices and her brilliant mockery, had the charm of the Italian evening that follows on the dazzling day, Strathmore uttered, with a meaning new upon his lips, the word which had been his derision and disdain ; the word before which she paused ; the word which all the voices of the voluptuous night seemed to re-echo around them, while the moonlight streamed on the uncovered limbs of sculptured marble that wore all the repose of sleep, and the stars gleamed upon the winding waters, white with the snowy burden of innumerable lilies. Love ! Strathmore would have flung away that word in disdain if spoken to him in the “ coldness of reason, in the pauses of judgment ; but the insidious passion to which he gave no name, but which in her presence swept over him like a scorch of a sirocco, *was* love ; love, if you will, in its most soulless, love in its most sensual, form, but that form the most alluring, the most dangerous, in which it ever steals into the life of man.

She shrugged her snow-white shoulders and pouted her lips with a *moue* of pretty contempt, while at the

same time the faint sigh which was so little in unison with her beauty, yet gave it so rare a charm, heaved the sapphires where they sparkled in her breast.

“ Bah ! that is the ‘ pastime of fools,’ too, and no more suits our world than the other. We do not believe in it ; we only mimic it. It may do for Undine among the water-lilies yonder, but we have no faith left for those childish idyls. They are *contes pour rire* for us ; we have outgrown them ! Who loves in our world ? ”

For all its mockery the question was one of pitiless danger, spoken by her, as she leaned against the balustrade in the moonlight, gazing down on to the dark masses of foliage sheltering beneath ; while her eyes were heavy as with some indefinite regret, as she pressed against her lips the leaves of a rose she had disentangled from the rest, which was wet and fragrant with the night dews. His lips brushed her hair, his breath fanned her brow, his words were whispered softly and wooingly :

“ To answer you would be to risk rebuke afresh. The truth would neither lie in words of flattery nor of friendship.”

“ Then—those words must not be spoken ! ”

The reply was but like the cold breath which fans the embers into fire ; uttered while her eyes dwelt on his without rebuke, while her lips parted with a breath that was so near a sigh, while half in sadness, half in coquetry, she silenced him with a light, fragrant blow of the roses, the words in their very forbiddance gave

fresh fuel to the dawning madness they rebuked. In that moment he would have staked his life that he was loved by the woman he coveted, as he of Israel coveted the loveliness on which the eastern sunlight fell, making it in his sight, while yet it was unwon, more precious than palace treasure, or kingly sway, than the good word of man, or than the smile of his God !

She turned from him with one of the swift movements which had the charm of the antelope's grace, turned as a woman might from the danger which she dreads and fears ; the jewels in her hair glancing in the starlight, the rose that had been pressed against her lips, falling on the marble.

“ Let us go in !—we have given time enough to the night we must give the rest to the world.”

“ And while the world claims you, even friendship may at least claim this ? ” said Strathmore, as he stooped, and lifted from the ground the rich fresh rose which had rested against lips as fair and fragrant as itself. She laughed her gay mocking laugh ; but her eyes were saddened still as she glanced at him while he held back the heavy draperies of a window for her to re-enter the drawing-rooms.

“ Ah, I know you too well : to-night the roses are taken in flattery ; to-morrow, withered and faded, they will be flung away with a mot ! You are a man of the world, Strathmore, and all you prize is power. There is no State secret in the core of that rose.”

"But there is a secret more fatal in the charm of the lips that have touched it."

Strathmore's eyes darkened as he spoke with the imperious and reckless passion she had rightly judged would be the only love to which he would ever waken, and which she had vowed to arouse in this man who held himself sheathed in an armour of proof; his words, losing the softness of suave compliment, were hoarse with a deeper meaning, and as he followed her he thrust the rose into his breast—the delicate leaves that had gained value in his sight, because her lips had touched them!

That night he drank deep of the delirious draught of a woman's witchery; that night, as he paid his gold to the Marquis, at écarté, he loathed the man who had bought her beauty with his title, and claimed her by right of ownership, as he claimed his racing stud, his chef de cuisine, his comet wines!—he loathed himself for having him at his table and beneath his roof; for chatting the idle nothings of familiar intercourse with him; and bidding the friendly good night of host to guest, to the man whom he hated with the dark hatred of the Strathmore blood, which was ever stronger than their wisdom, and deeper than their love, and closer than their honour. True! We seat our foes at our board, and welcome what we hate to our hospitality, and eat salt with those who betray us, and those whom we betray; wronged Octavia smiles as she receives Cleopatra into her house, and Launcelot

shakes hands in good-fellowship with Arthur, the day after he has writ the stain on his friend's knightly shield ! It is done every day, and he was accustomed to such convenience and such condonation ; but Strathmore, when once roused, was a man of darker, swifter, deeper passions than the passions of our day, and the leaven of his race was working in him, beneath the cold and egotistic surface of habit and of breeding. As stillness fell that night upon his household, and sleep came with the hush of the advancing hours, and he stood in the silence of his own chamber, hating the husband, coveting the wife, knowing that both were now beneath his roof ; he thought of her where, like the Lady Christabel,

Her lovely limbs she did undress,
And lay down in her loveliness :

till, with an oath, he pressed the broken rose-leaves to his lips with a fierce kiss where her own had rested on them, and hurled them out away into the darkness of the night.

Already—did he love this woman ?

CHAPTER XVI.

“AT HER FEET HE BOWED AND FELL.”

“I CONGRATULATE you on your fresh honours, old fellow. Bomont writes word the ministers have selected you for the Confidential mission to —. Ticklish business, and a very high compliment,” said Camelot, one morning at breakfast, when Lord Vavasour had left for Spa, and his wife had been some weeks the reigning Queen at the Abbey.

Strathmore went on stirring his chocolate.

“Bomont has no earthly business to tittle-tattle Foreign-office secrets; however, since he’s let it out, I may confess to it.”

“You accept, of course? You must leave at once —eh?”

“The affair’s been on the tapis some time. I always knew I should be selected to succeed Caradoc. Try that potted char, Lady Beaudesert,” answered Strathmore, avoiding direct answer to either of

Camelot's inquiries, while among his letters lay one which selected him, in a juncture of critical difficulty, to occupy a post which older diplomatists bitterly envied him, and which gratified his ambition and signalled his abilities to the fullest. Questions and congratulations flooded in on him from the people about his breakfast-table, among whom Lady Vassour was not ; she usually had her coffee in her own chamber.

" You will draw us into a war, I dare say, Strathmore," laughed Beatrix Beaudesert. " You dips love an embroglie as dearly as journalists love a ' crisis ; ' and your race are born statesmen. Your *berceauettes* must have been trimmed with Red Tape ; and you must have learnt your alphabet out of Machiavelli's *Maxims* ! You're not like Hamlet ; you specially enjoy the times being ' out of joint,' that you may show your surgical skill in setting them right."

" Of course," laughed Strathmore. " If half a million slaughtered gets a General the Garter, what does he care who rots, so long as he rises ? Man's the only animal that preys upon his species, and for his superiority calls himself head of all creation. The brutes only fly at their foes ; we turn on our friends if we get anything by it ! "

" *Fi donc !*" cried Madame de Ruelle. " You have just received the Bath, and are appointed to a post which all the diplomatic world will envy you. You ought not to be in a cynical mood, Strathmore. It

is those with whom life goes badly, who write satires and turn epigrams ; a successful man always approves the world, because the world has approved him !”

“True, madame ;” but at the same time there may be a drop of *amari aliquid* under his tongue, because the world has approved other people too !”

“Dear old fellow, how glad I am !” said Erroll, meeting him in the doorway a quarter of an hour afterwards. “My K.C.B.! a discerning nation does for once put the right man in the right place. On my word, Strath, I *am* proud of you !”

“Thank you !”

The two monosyllables were odiously cold after the cordial warmth of the other’s words, and Strathmore crossed the hall without adding others. He was conscious that he could fling away power, place, fame, honour, if one woman’s voice would murmur, “Relinquish them—for me !” And the consciousness made him bitter to all the world, even to the man who was closer than a brother.

“The deuce ! How changed he is ! It is all that woman’s doings, with her angel’s face and her devil’s mischief ; her gazelle’s eyes and her Marcia’s soul !” muttered Erroll.

“*Vous avez l’air tant soit peu contrarié, monsieur !*” said a voice behind him, half amused, half contemptuous, as Lady Vavasour, having just descended the staircase, swept past him, radiant in the morning sun-

light ; her silk folds trailing on the inlaid floor, and the fragrance of her hair scenting the air. Perhaps she had heard his words ?

Lady Vavasour, however, could very admirably defy him and his enmity, and anybody or everybody else. She played utterly unscrupulously, but equally matchlessly, with Strathmore ; now avoiding him, till she made his cheek grow white and his eyes dark as night with anger ; now listening with a feigned rebuke, which made it but the sweeter, to the whispers of a love, that while she chid, she knew how to madden with the mere sweep of her dress across him.

She was a coquette and a voluptuary. She loved with the shallow, tenacious, fleeting love, such as Parabère and Pompadour knew, while romance still mingled with licence, as their best *pointe à la sauce*. Strathmore's nature was new to her. To first rouse, and then play with it, was delightful to this beautiful panther ; and she did both, till a very insanity was awakened in him. *Love* is by a hundred times too tame and meaningless a word for what had now broken up from his coldness as volcanic flames break up from ice. It was a passion born entirely from the senses, if you will, without any nobler element, any better spring ; but for that very reason it was headlong as flame, and no more to be arrested than the lightning that seethes through men's veins and scorches all before it.

She heard of his appointment to conduct the mis-

sion to — as though he were her brother, in whose career she was fraternally interested, and nothing more ; and spoke of his coming departure to Northern Europe as if it were a question of going into the next county for a steeplechase or a coursing meeting.

“ Ah ! you are going to — ? ” she said, tranquilly, when she met him in the library, trifling with a new French novelette. “ It will be very cold ! Give my compliments to M. le Prince de Vörn ; he is a great friend of mine, though he is a political foe of yours. His wit is charming ! ”

Strathmore, standing near her, felt his face pale with passion to the very lips as she spoke. She had wooed, while she repressed ; she had tempted, while she forbade his love, as a woman only does who knows that she has conquered where conquest is dear to her ; and now—she heard of his departure for a lengthened and indefinite term as carelessly as though he told her he was going to visit his stables or his kennels !

He tried vainly that day to meet her alone ; she avoided or evaded him from luncheon to dinner with tantalising dexterity. Letters to write, a game of billiards, chit-chat in the drawing-rooms—one thing or another occupied her so ingeniously, that not even for a single second did she give him the chance of a *tête-à-tête*. She knew he sought one, and pleased herself by baffling and denying him, while her insouciant indifference tortured him to fury. Ambition had been the god, power the lust which alone had possessed him ; with both within his grasp, he would

now have thrown both from him, as idly as a child casts pebbles to the sea, only to feel the lips of Marion Vavasour close upon his own !

That night there was a ball given at White Ladies, one among the many entertainments which had marked her visit ; it was to be, according to her command, a *bal costumé*, and as Strathmore went to dress he caught sight of the azure gleam of her silken skirt sweeping along the corridor to the State chambers. He crossed the passage that divided them, and in an instant was at her side ; she started slightly, and glanced up at him :

“ Ah ! Lord Cecil, you try one’s nerves ! really, you are so like those Vandykes in the gallery, that one may very pardonably take you for a ghost ! ”

Strathmore laid his hand on her arm to detain her, looking down into her eyes by the light from above :

“ I have sought a word alone with you all the day through, and sought it vainly ; will you grant it me now ? ”

“ Now ? Impossible ! I am going to dress. The toilette is to us what ambition is to you, the first, and last, and only love—a ruling passion strong in death ! A statesman dying, asks, ‘ Is the treaty signed ? ’ a woman dying asks, ‘ Am I *bien coiffée* ? ’ ”

Laughing, she moved onward to leave him, but Strathmore moved too, keeping his hold on her hand :

“ Hear me you must ! I told you once that I did not dare to whisper the sole guerdon that would content me as the reward you offered ; *now* I dare, be-

cause, spoken or unspoken, you must know that the world holds but one thought, one memory, one idol for me ; you must know—*that I love you !*”

The words were uttered which, old as the hills eternal, have been on every human lip, and cursed more lives than they have ever blessed. And Marion Vavasour listened, as the light gleamed upon the lovely youth which lit her face, and her eyes met his with the glance that women only give when they love.

“Hush, you forget,” she murmured (and chiding from those lips was sweet as the soft wrath of the south wind !)—“*I must not hear you.*”

But the eyes forgave him, while the voice rebuked : and Strathmore’s love, loosed from all bondage, poured itself out in words of eager honeyed eloquence, with every richest oratory, with every ardent subtilty, that art could teach and passion frame. To win this woman, he would have perilled, had he owned them, twenty lives and twenty souls, and thought the prize well bought !

She listened still, her hand resigned to his, a warm flush on her cheeks, and her heart beating quicker in its gossamer nest of priceless lace ; stirred with triumph, perhaps stirred with love. Then—she drew from him with a sudden movement, and laughed in his face with radiant, malicious mockery :

“Ah ! my lord, you have learned, then, how dangerous it was to boast to a woman that you had but one idol—Ambition ; that you desired Age, and despised Love ! The temptation to punish you was

irresistible ; — you have learned an altered creed now ! ”

The silvery laughter mocking him rang lightly out upon the silence, and, ere he could arrest her, she had entered her chamber, and the door had closed. He stood alone in the empty corridor, stunned ; — and a fierce oath broke from his throat. Had this woman fooled him ? The echo of her words, the ringing of her laughter, stung him to madness ; the taunt, the mirth, the jest flung at him in the moment when he had laid bare his weakness, and could have taken his oath that he was loved, was like seething oil flung upon flame. He swore that night to wrench confession from her of her love, or— or—— He grew dizzy with the phantoms of his own thoughts. But one resolve was fixed in him ; to win this woman, or—to work on her the worst revenge that a foiled passion and a fooled love ever wrought.

As he passed out of the State corridor and turned towards his own chamber he came unhappily upon Erroll.

“ Is it you, Strath ? I want a word with you ; may I come in for ten minutes ? ”

“ *Entrez.* ”

Strathmore’s voice sounded strange in his own ears ; he would have given away a year of his life to have been left alone at that moment.

Erroll followed him into his chamber, however, noticing nothing unusual, for Strathmore, with Italian passion, had more than English self-control ;

and Bertie, who had had bad intelligence of a weedy-looking bay on whom he had risked a good deal for the approaching Cesarewitch, came as usual to detail his fears and doubts, and speculate on the most judicious hedging with Strathmore. With a mad love running riot in him, and a fierce resolve seething up into settled shape, Strathmore had to sit and listen to Newmarket troubles, and balance the pros and cons of Turf questions as leisurely and as interestedly as of old! Apparently, he was calm enough; actually, every five minutes of restraint lashed his pent-up passion into fury.

The Newmarket business done with, Erroll still lingered; he had something else to say, and scarcely knew how to phrase it.

“Will all these people stay much longer?” he began; “they’ve been here a long time.”

“I don’t tell my guests to go away,” said Strathmore, with a smile. “Besides, the pheasants just now are at their prime.”

“The pheasants! Oh yes, but I was thinking of the women. To be sure, though, you must leave yourself in a few days; I forgot! When must you start for — ?”

“It is uncertain.” The subject annoyed him, and he answered shortly.

Erroll was silent a moment; then he looked up, his eyes shining with their frank and kindly light:

“Strath, you wouldn’t take wrongly anything *I* said, would you?”

"My dear Erroll! what an odd question. I believe I am not usually tenacious?"

"Of course not; still I fancy you'd let *me* say to you what you mightn't stand from another man; I hope so at least, old fellow! We have never been on ceremony with one another yet; and I want to ask you, Cis, if you know how yours and Lady Vavasour's names are coupled together?"

He could not have chosen a more fatal hour for his question!

"Who couples them?"

The words were brief and quietly said enough, but Strathmore's hand clenched where it lay on the table, and an evil light gleamed in his eyes.

"Oh, nobody in especial, but more or less everybody," answered Erroll, carelessly, whom the gesture did not put on his guard. "Your attention to her, you know, must be noticed; impossible to help it! Naturally the men joke about it when you're out of hearing; fellows always will."

"What do they say?"

The words were quiet still, but Strathmore's teeth were set like a mastiff's.

"You can guess well enough; you know how we always laugh over that sort of thing. Look here, Strathmore!" and Erroll, breaking out of the lazy softness of his usual tone, leant forward eagerly and earnestly, "I know you'll take my words as they're meant; and if you wouldn't, it would be a wretched friendship that shirked the truth when its telling were

needed. If you called me out for it to-morrow, I would let you know what everybody is saying—that you are infatuated by a woman who is only playing with you !”

Strathmore leaned back in his chair, fastening his wristband stud, with a cold sneer on his face ; it cost him much to repress the passion that would have betrayed him.

“ The world is very good to trouble itself about me ; if you will name the particular members of it who do the gossiping, I will thank them in a different fashion.”

“ The better way would be to give them no grounds for it !”

“ Grounds ? I don’t apprehend you.”

“ You do and you must !” broke in Erroll, impatiently ; this smooth, icy coating did not impose on him. “ Whether your heart be in the matter or not, you act as though it were. You are becoming the very slave of that arch coquette, who never loved anything in her life save her own beauty ; you, who ridiculed everything like woman-worship, are positively infatuated with Marion Vavasour ! Stop ! hear me out ! I have no business with what you do ; true enough ! I am breaking into a subject no man has any right to touch on to another—I know that ! But I like you well enough to risk your worst anger ; and I speak plainly because you and I have no need to weigh our words to each other. Good God ! *you* must have too much pride, Strathmore, to be fooled for the vanity of a woman !”

He stopped in his impetuous flood of words, and looked at his listener, who had heard him tranquilly—a dangerous tranquillity, thin ice over lava-flames! Strathmore only kept reins on the storm because it rose to his lips—to betray him.

“Pardon me, Erroll,” he said, slowly and pointedly, “I will not take *your* words as they might naturally be taken, since you claim the privilege of ‘old friendship;’ but I must remind you that friendship may be both officious and impertinent. The office of a moral censor sits on you very ill; attention to a married woman is not so extraordinarily uncommon in our set that it need alarm your virtue——”

“Virtue be hanged!” broke in Erroll, impetuously. “You don’t understand, or you *won’t* understand me. All I say is, that hundreds of fellows will tell you that Marion Vavasour is the most consummate coquette going; and that as soon as she has drawn a man on into losing his head for her, she turns round and laughs him to scorn. What do you suppose Scrope Waverley and all that lot will say? Only that you have been first trapped and then tricked, as they were——!”

“Thank you, I have no fear! Lady Vavasour makes you singularly bitter?”

“Perhaps she does; because I see her work. Near that woman you are no more what you were than——”

“Really I must beg you to excuse my hearing a homily upon myself!” interrupted Strathmore, as he

rose, speaking coldly, intolerantly, and haughtily. “As regards Lady Vavasour, she is *my guest*, and as such I do not hear her spoken of in this manner. As regards the gossip you are pleased to retail, people must chatter as they like, if they chatter in my hearing I can resent it, without having my path pointed out to me; and for the future I will trouble you to remember that even the privileges of friendship may be stretched too far if you overtax them.”

While he spoke he rang the bell for Diaz, and as the Albanian entered the chamber from the bathroom, Erroll turned and went out without more words. He was angered that his remonstrance had had no more avail; he was hurt that his interference had been so ill received, and his motive so little comprehended. Like most counsellors, he felt that what he had done had been ill-advised and ill-timed: while Strathmore, indifferent to how he might have wounded a friendship which he had often sworn worth all the love of women, was stung to madness by the words with which Erroll had unwittingly heaped fuel on to flame. Men saw his passion for Marion Vavasour! He swore that they should hopelessly and longingly envy its success.

The fancy ball at White Ladies was as brilliant as it could be made; the great circle at the Duke of Trémayne’s, the people staying at Lady Millicent Clinton’s, and at other houses of note in the county, afforded guests at once numerous and exclusive, and

the Royal women who had been visitors at White Ladies had never been better entertained than was Marion Vavasour. As he received them in the great reception-room known as the King's Hall, that night, women of the world, not easily impressible, glancing at him, were arrested by they knew not what, and remembered long afterwards how he had looked that evening. He wore the dress of the Knights Templars, the white mantle flung over a suit of black Milan armour worked with gold, and the costume suited him singularly; while it yet seemed to bring out more strongly still the resemblance in him to all that was dark and dangerous in the Strathmore portraits. His face was slightly flushed, like a man after a carouse; his wit was courtly and light, but very bitter; his attentions to the women were far more impressive than his ever were—he might have been in love with all in his rooms!—but his eyes, dark with suppressed eagerness, and with a heavy shade beneath them, glanced impatiently over the crowd. Every one had arrived, but *she* had not yet descended; his salons were filled, but to *him* they were empty! This was no light, languid love, seeking a liaison as a mere pastime, which had entered into Strathmore for another man's wife; it was the delirium, the frenzy, the blindness, in which the world holds but one woman!

At last, with her glittering hair given to the winds, a diadem of diamonds crowning her brow, snow-white

clouds of drapery floating around her, light as morning mist, and her beautiful feet shod with golden sandals, she came, when all the rooms were full, living impersonation of the Summer-Noon she represented. A crowd of *costumés* followed her steps, and murmurs of irrepressible admiration accompanied her wherever she moved ; there were many beautiful women there that night at White Ladies, but none that equalled, none that touched her. The golden apple was cast without a dissent into the white bosom of Marion Vavasour ; and at sight of her his reason reeled and fell, and his madness mastered him, as it subdued him of Brocéliande before the witching eyes and under the wreathing arms of Vivien,

while the forest echoed Fool !

His face wore the reckless resolve which was amongst the dark traits of the Strathmores when their ruthless will had fixed a goal, and underneath their calm and courtly seeming, the fierce spirit was a-flame which made them pitiless as death in all pursuit. His eyes followed the gleaming trail of her streaming hair, the flash of her diamond diadem, with a look which she caught, and fanned to fire with one dreamy glance of languor, one touch of her floating drapery. And yet, even while the passion devoured him, he hated her for its pain—hated her because she was another's and not his ! Do you know nothing of this because it has not

touched you?—tut!—the forms of human love are as varied and as controlless as the forms of human life; and you have learned but little of the world, and the men that make it, if you have not learned that Love, often and again, treads and trenches close on Hate.

It was as though she set her will to make her beauty more than mortal, and goad him on till he was as utterly her bond-slave, as the Viking whom, as the Norse legend tells, twenty strong men could not capture, yet who lay, helpless and bound as in gyves of iron, by one frail, single thread of a woman's golden hair. That night his passion mastered him, and all that was most dangerous, in a nature where fire slept under ice, woke into life, and set into one imperious resolve.

It was some hours after midnight, when he passed with her into a *cabinet de peinture*. The wax-radiance streamed upon her where she stood like some dazzling thing of light, some dream of the Greek poets, some sorceress of the East, some diamond-crowned Priestess of the Sun. In the stillness of the night they were alone, and her eyes met his own with a glance which wooed him on to his sweet temptation. Ambition seemed idle as the winds; fame he was ready to cast aside like dross; at the most brilliant point in his career, he was willing to throw away all the past, and cut away all the future, so that her voice but whispered him "Stay!" His

honour to the man who had been a guest beneath his roof, the bond which bound him to hold sacred the woman whom his house harboured, were forgotten and left far behind him, drowned in his delirium as men's wisdom is drowned in wine. He saw, remembered, heeded nothing in earth or heaven save *her*. And she knew the meaning of his silence as he stood beside her.

“ So you will leave England very soon, Strathmore ? ”

The words were light and ordinary : but her word is but a tithe of a woman's language ; and it was her eyes which spoke, which challenged him to summon strength to leave her ; which dared him to rank ambition before her, and claimed and usurped the dominion which power alone had filled ! It was the eyes he answered, only seeing in the midnight glare the fairness of her face.

“ Bid me stay for *you* ;—and I resign the Mission to-morrow ! ”

“ What ! desert your career, abandon your ambition, give up your power, and at a *woman's* word, too ! Fie, fie, Lord Cecil ! ”

The sweet laughter echoed in his ear, and her face had all its witching mockery as she turned it to him in the light.

“ Hush ! My God !—you know my madness ; you shall play with it no longer. Bid me stay, and I give up everything for you ! But you must love me as I

love ; you must choose to-night for yourself and me. If you are fooling me, beware ; it will be at a heavy price ! Love me ;—and I throw away for you, honour, fame, life, what you will !”

The words were spoken in her ear, fierce with the passion which was reckless of all cost ; broken with the love which was only conscious of itself, and of the beauty that it adored. His face was white as death ; his eyes gazed into hers, hot, dark, lurid as the eyes of a tiger. This mad idolatry, this imperious strength, made love new to her, dear to her, as its costliest toy to a child ; a richer gage of her power, a stronger proof of her dominion. A blush warm and lovely, if it were but a lie, wavered in her face ; her eyes answered his with dreamy languor ; the diamonds in her breast trembled with the heavings of her heart, and even while she hushed him, and turned from him, her hand lingered within his

He knew that he was loved !—and his whole life would have been staked on that mad hour. His arms closed round her in an embrace she could not break from ; he wound his hands in the shining shower of her amber hair ; he crushed this soft and dazzling thing which mocked, and maddened him, against the chill steel of his armour as though to slay her. Burning words broke from him, delirious, imperious, half menace, half idolatry, born of the strong passion, and the sensuous softness, of which his love at once was made.

“I sacrifice what you choose, for you ; or—I hate you more bitterly than man ever hated ! *Friendship* between *us* ! My God ! it must be one of two things —deadliest hate, or sweetest love !”

He paused abruptly, crushing her with fierce unconscious strength against his breast, gazing down into the face so fatally fair. Her eyes looked into his with all their eloquence of loveliness ; her amber hair floated, soft and silken, across his breast ; and his lips met hers in kisses that only died to be renewed again, each longer, sweeter, more lingering than the last.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE AXE LAID TO THE ROOT.

“ You have written ! ” she said, softly, looking up into his eyes.

The whisper was brief, but as subtle and full of power as any words that ever murmured from Cleopatra’s lips, wooing him of Rome to leave his shield for foes to mock at, and his sword to rust, and his honour to drift away, a jeered and worthless thing, while he lay lapped in a woman’s love, with no heaven save in a woman’s eyes.

It was some hours past noon on the morrow of the *bal costumé*; she had not yet left the State chambers. Her hair was unbound, folds of azure, and lace of gossamer texture, enveloped her; and she lay back on her low chair, resting her cheek on her white arm, and letting her eyes dwell upon his.

“ You have written ? ” she murmured, softly, her hand lying in his, her lips brushing his brow.

For all answer he put into her hand a letter he had just then penned—a letter to decline the appointment offered to him; to refuse the most brilliant distinction that could have fallen to him; in a word, to resign the ambitions his life had been centred in, to destroy the career, and the goal, of his present, and his future!

Her head rested against his breast while she read it, her eyes glancing over the few brief lines which gave up all power and honour, the world and the world's ambitions, and flung away life's best prizes at her bidding, as though they were empty shells or withered leaves. And a smile, proud and glad, came upon her lips. Even she had scarcely counted on binding him thus far to her feet;—on chaining him thus utterly her slave. She read it, then she lifted her eyes, now sweet with the light of love, her warm breath fanning his cheek.

“You will not regret it, Cecil? Are you sure?”

“Regret! My Heaven! what room have I to dream even of regret *now*? My whole future would be a willing price paid down for one hour of my joy!”

The last words were spoken in a madman's heedless, headlong love! He stooped over her, spending breathless kisses on her lips, and passing his hands through the golden scented hair which floated on her shoulders. Every single shining thread might have been a sorcery-twisted withe that bound him powerless, so utterly he bowed before her power, so utterly

he was blinded to all that lay beyond the delicious languor, and the sensuous joys, which steeped his present in their rich delight.

An hour afterwards, Strathmore descended from the State chambers by a secret staircase which wound downward to the library. He listened ; the room was silent ; he looked through the aperture left in the carvings, by those subtle builders of the olden days, for such reconnoissance by those who need secresy ; it was empty, and, pressing the panel back, he entered. As it chanced, however, in the deep embrasure of a window, hidden by the heavy curtains, Erroll sat reading the papers ; and, as he looked up, he saw Strathmore, before the panel had wholly closed on its invisible hinges, that were screened in a mass of carving. Erroll knew whence that concealed passage led.

“Why was she not dead in all her demon’s beauty before ever she came here ?” he muttered to himself ; for Erroll had grown jealous of Marion Vavasour ; and had, moreover, strange stray notions of honour here and there, better fitting the days of Galahad than our own.

“You here, Bertie !” said Strathmore, carelessly, very admirably concealing the annoyance he felt, as Erroll looked up from his retreat. “What’s the news ?”

“Nothing !” yawned the Sabreur, stretching him the *Times*. “They notice your appointment for

— ; very approvingly, too, for the Thunderer. When do you go, old fellow ? ”

“ I do not go at all,” Strathmore answered briefly. He was aware it must be known sooner or later, and, in the reckless rapture of his present, ridicule, remark, or censure, were alike disregarded.

Erroll looked quickly up at him :

“ *Not go?* ”

“ No. I have requested permission to decline the appointment.”

There was a dead pause of unbroken silence ; then, with a sudden impetuous movement, Erroll rose, pushing back his chair, and flinging his fair hair out of his eyes with a gesture of impatient anger :

“ Good God ! Strathmore, have you sneered at every love all your life through only to become a woman’s slave at last ! ”

The swift dark wrath of his race glanced into Strathmore’s eyes. At all times he brooked comment or interference ill ; now he *knew* himself the slave of a woman, and while in the sweet insanity of successful love his serfdom was delicious, and its bondage dearer than any liberty that had ever been his boast, the words were still bitter to him. To any but his friend they would have been as bitterly resented.

“ That cursed coquette ! ” muttered Erroll between his teeth, as he paced impatiently up and down. “ What ! she enslaves you till you wreck your whole future at her word, let all the world see you in your

madness, and forget your honour even under your own roof!"

The words broke out almost unconsciously ; he was rife with hatred for the woman who had robbed him of his friend, and grown more powerful with Strathmore than honour or ambition ; than the present, or the future ; than the ridicule of the world, or the triumphs of his career.

Evil passions passed over his listener's face, flaming into life all the more darkly because the accusation bore with it the sting of Nathan's unto David—*the sting of truth.*

"By Heaven ! no man on the face of the earth, save you, should dare say that to me and live!"

Erroll looked up, stopped, and halted before him, his sunny blue eyes growing cordial and earnest as a woman's :

"Dear old fellow, forgive me ! I had no right, perhaps, to use the words I did, but we have never stopped to pick our speech for one another. No!—hear me, Strathmore. By Heaven ! you *shall!* Your honour is dearer to me than it ever will be to anyone, and I only ask you now to pause, and think how you will endure for the world to know that you are so utterly a coquette's bond-slave that you lie at her beck and call, and give up all your best ambitions at her bidding. I am sinner enough myself, God knows, and have plenty to answer for ; but no passion should have so blinded me to honour, let her have tempted as she would, that the wife of an absent

guest should have ceased to become sacred to me, while trusted to my protection, and under my own roof !”

He stopped : and a dead silence fell again between them. They were fearless and chivalrous words, built on the code of Gawaine and of Arthur ; and the spirit of the dead Knights, and of a bygone age, broke up from the soft indolence and easy epicureanism of the man, and found its way to just and dauntless speech ; but speech that on the ear which heard it was useless as a trumpet-blast in the ear of a dead man, as little heeded and as powerless to rouse ! The sting which lay in the Prophet’s charge to him of Israel lay here ; but here it touched to the quick of no remorse : it only heated the furnace afresh, as a blast of wind blows the fires to a white heat.

For one instant, while Erroll’s glance met his, Strathmore made a forward gesture, like that of a panther about to spring ; then with all that was coldest, most bitter, most evil in him awake, he leant back in his chair, with a smile on his lips.

“ An excellent homily ! Perhaps, like many other preachers, you are envious of what you so venomously upbraid ! ”

Over Erroll’s face a flush of pain passed, as over a woman’s at a brutal and unmerited word.

“ For shame ! for shame ! ” he said, hotly. “ You know better than to believe your own words, Strathmore ! I do not stand such vile inuendoes from you ! ”

Strathmore raised his eyebrows, his chill and contemptuous sneer still upon his lips; his anger was very bitter at all times when the velvet glove was stripped off and the iron hand disclosed, which was a feature of his race.

“*Soit!* it is very immaterial to me! Pray put an end to these heroic speeches. I have no taste for scenes, and from any other man I should call an account for them under a harsher name.”

“Call for what account you will! But does our friendship go for so little that it is to be swept away in a second for a word about a woman who is as worthless, if you saw her in her true light, as any——”

“Silence!” said Strathmore, passionately. “I bear no interference with myself and no traducement to her! End the subject, once and for all, or——”

“Or you will break with a friendship of twenty years for a love that will not last twenty weeks!” broke in Erroll, bitterly. It cut him to the quick to be cast off thus for the mere sake of a capricious coquette; from their earliest Eton days they had had no words between them till now that this woman brought them in her train!

“It is the love which appears to excite your acrimony!” laughed Strathmore, with his chilliest scorn; that swift, keen jealousy stirring in him which is ever the characteristic of such passion as his, even in its earliest hours of acknowledgment and return, and

which permits no man even to look wishfully after its idol unchastised.

As sharply as if a shot had struck him, Erroll swung round, righteous indignation flushing his face, and his azure eyes flashing fire.

“For God’s sake, Strathmore, has your mad passion so warped your nature that you can set down such vile motives in cold blood to my share? I have no other feeling than hatred for the woman who befools you. *That I will grant you is strong enough, for I see her as she is!*”

“Most wise seer and admirable preacher! Since when have you turned sermonizer instead of sinner?” sneered Strathmore, coldly, the dark wrath of his race gleaming in his eyes. “It sits on you very ill!”

“Sermonizer I am not, nor have I title to be!” broke in Erroll, his gentle temper goaded fairly into anger; “but still in your place of host I might have paused before I violated the common laws of hospitality and honour to the wife of an absent man, let her have been my temptress as she would!”

In another instant words would have been uttered which would have cut down and cast away the friendship of a lifetime; but the door of the drawing-room opened.

“Are you tired of waiting, Major Erroll? Never mind! Patience is a virtue, if, like most other virtues, she be a little dull sometimes!” said Lady Beaudesert, as she floated in—a picture for Landseer—with a

brace of handsome spaniels treading on the trailing folds of her violet habit.

Her presence arrested, perforce, the words that were rising hot and bitter to the lips of both. But when the axe is laid at the root, what matter if its work be delayed a few hours, a few days, a few months? The tree which would have stood through storms is doomed by it, and will fall at the last!

The words Erroll had spoken that day had been just and true ones: but, like most words of truth in this world, they had been rash, and idle as the winds to carry one whit of warning, to stay for one hour's thought the headlong sweep of a great passion. Now that she had, like himself, forgotten every bond of honour, and cast aside every memory save the indulgence of a forbidden love, the semi-hatred which had so strangely mingled with Strathmore's fatal intoxication had gone: and with it the last frail cord which had held him back from falling utterly beneath the sway of her power. If in the bitterness of an unwelcome love he had been her slave, in the delirium of a permitted one he was more hopelessly so still. Erroll's charge of having violated the laws of hospitality stung him for one instant to the quick; but the next it was forgottten, as her smile lighted upon him, and her silvery laugh rang on his ear! He weighed nothing in the scale against her; he cast away all to stay in the light of the eyes where his heaven hung; he remembered nothing but the ex-

ultant joy which lay in those brief, yet all-eloquent words : “he loved, and was loved !”

She held him in her fatal web, as Guenevere held her Lover, when the breath of her lips sullied the shield which no foe had ever tarnished, and her false love coiled with subtle serpent-folds round Launcelot till he fell. But in Marion Vavasour would never arise, what pardoned and purified, the soul of the Daughter of Leodegraunce : those waters of bitterness which yet are holy—Remorse and Shame.

CHAPTER XVIII.

GUENEVERE AND ELAINE.

THAT night, when the men had left the smoking-room, and all was still, Bertie Erroll quitted the Abbey by one of those secret entrances which had been known to him, as to Strathmore from their childish days, and took his way across the park, treading the thick golden leaves under foot. A bitterness and depression were on him, very new to him, since he usually shook off all care, as he shook the ash off his cigar. After such words as had passed between them, he would not have stayed an hour under any other man's roof; but he loved Strathmore well enough not to resent it thus, though the breach in their friendship cut him more hardly than the sneers which had been cast at himself, as he paced on through the beech woods, that were damp and chill in the silent night, with white mists rising up from the waters in thin wreaths of vapour.

At some distance, just without the boundaries of White Ladies, a light glimmered through the autumn network of brown boughs and crimson leaves, from the casement of a cottage which stood, so shut in by wood from the lonely road near, that it might as easily have been overlooked by any passer-by, as a yellowhammer's nest on the highway. Its solitary little beam shone bright, and star-like, through the damp fogs of the chilly midnight; like the light which burns before some Virgin shrine, and greets us as we travel, wayworn and travel-stained and foot-weary, down the rocky windings of some hill-side abroad. The simile crossed Erroll's mind, and perhaps smote something on his heart; it *was* the light of a holy shrine to him, but one from which his steps too often turned, and one which now reproached him.

He passed under the drooping heavy boughs, and over the fallen leaves, across the garden of the little cottage, drew a latch-key from his pocket, opened the door, and entered. A light was left burning for him in the tiny cottage entrance, which was still as death; he took the lamp in his hand, mounted the staircase noiselessly, and turned into the bed-chamber upon his left. It was small, and simply arranged, but about it, here and there, were articles of refined luxury; and half kneeling beside the bed, as she had lately knelt in prayer, half resting against it, in the slumber which had conquered the watchful wakefulness of love, was a young girl, delicate and fair

as any of the white lilies that had bloomed one brief hour, to perish the next, on the lake-like waters of White Ladies. Her head rested on her arm, her lips were slightly parted, and murmuring fondly his own name, while

her face so fair,
Stirred with her dream as rose-leaves with the air.

His step was too noiseless to awake her, and he stood still gazing on her in that slumber in which Life, becoming at once ethereal and powerless, escaping from earth, yet lying at man's mercy, so strangely and so touchingly counterfeits Death. And while he looked, thoughts arose, filling him with vague reproach; thoughts at which the women he had just left, the women who knew him in intrigue, and in pleasure, and in idle flirtations, would have bitterly marvelled, and as bitterly sneered. The world in which we live knows nothing of us in our best hours, as it knows nothing of us in our worst!

They were in strange contrast!—the dazzling beauty of Marion Vavasour, on which he had looked a few hours before, with a sorceress-lustre glancing from her eyes, and rare Byzantine jewels flashing on her breast; with this fair and mournful loveliness, which was before him now, hushed to rest in the holiness of sleep, with a smile like a child's upon the tender lips, and with a shadow from the lamp above falling upon a brow so pure that it might have been shadowed by an angel's wings. They were in strange contrast!—and he stood beside his Wife, as

Launcelot stood and gazed upon Elaine, while the pure breath of a stainless love was still upon his soul, and while the subtle power of Guenevere only stole upon him in the fevered, vague, phantasma of a fleeting dream, unknown and unadmitted even there.

He stooped over her, and his lips broke the spell of her sleep with a caress. She awoke with a low, glad cry, and sprang up to nestle in his breast, to twine her arms about him, to murmur her welcome in sweet, joyous words.

“Ah, my better angel,” he whispered, fondly yet bitterly, as he rested against his the cheek which still blushed at his kiss, speaking rather to his own thoughts than to her, “why are men so doomed by their own madness, that they sicken and weary of a pure and sacred love like yours, on which Heaven itself might smile; and forsake it for a few short hours of some guilty passion, that is as senseless as the drunkard’s delirium !”

And she believed he only spoke but of the sweetness of their own love, pitying those who had never known such, and smiled up into his eyes.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SILVER SHIELD AND THE CHARMED LANCE.

“Is he to monopolise her for ever? He’s kept the field a cursed long time,” said a Secretary of Legation, dropping his lorgnon, one night at the Opera in Paris.

“The deuce he has!” said his Grace of Lindenmere. “Madame is marvellously faithful; and they say he’s as mad after her now as when he first——”

“*Taisez vous!* A scandal six months old is worse than dining off a *réchauffé*,” broke in the Vicomte de Belesprit. “A naughty story is like a pretty mistress; charming at the onset, but a great bore when it’s lost its novelty. All Paris chattered itself hoarse over their liaison last December; what we want to know *now* is—when will it come to an end?”

“I dare say you do,” chuckled the old Earl of Beaume. “But the succession there would be as dangerous as to the Polish Vice-royalty; a smile from her would cost a shot from him.”

"Ah!—sort of man to do that style of thing," yawned the Duke. "Don't understand it myself, never should. But he's positively her slave—actually."

"Plenty of you envy him his slavery; white arms are pleasant handcuffs," laughed Lord Beaume. "But that woman's ruined him, and, what's worse, his career. He gave up the special mission to — because it must have taken him where her ladyship could not go! A man's never great in public life till he's ceased to care for women!"

"Which is possibly the cause, sir, why the country, looking to you for great things, has always looked in vain?" said Lindenmere.

The Earl laughed, taking out his tabatière; he was good nature itself, and his Grace was a privileged wit, *c'est à dire*, one of that class who have made rudeness "the thing," and supply the esprit they lack by the impudence they love! The fashion has its conveniences—it is difficult to be brilliant, but it is so easy to be brusque.

Those whom they discussed were Lady Vavasour and Strathmore.

Their love had been the theme of many buzzing scandals the autumn before, when, on leaving White Ladies, she had returned to Paris accompanied by him; but the buzz had soon exhausted itself, and the liaison had become a fact generally understood, and but very little disguised. His place and right had been long unchallenged, however bitterly envied;

and whatever rumour had said of her capricious inconstancy, as yet she had showed no disloyalty to her lover, whatever she showed to her lord. Either she really loved at last, or her entire dominion over the man who had scoffed at the sway of women satiated her delight in power; for no coquettres ever roused the jealousy, fierce as an Eastern's, which accompanied his passion, or flattered the hopes of those who sought to supplant him. If any magician had had the power twelve months before to show him *himself* as he had now become, Strathmore would have recognised the revelation, as little as we in youth should recognise our own features could we see them marked with the corruption they will wear in death.

Men who have been long invulnerable to passion ever become its abject bond-slaves when they at length bend down to it. Ambition was lulled to forgetfulness in the sweet languor of his love; had he been offered the kingship of the earth he would have renounced it, if to assume its empire he must have left her side! This man, who had long believed that he could rule his will, and mould his life, as though he were, god-like, exempt from every inevitable weakness or accident of mankind, had sunk into a woman's arms, and let the golden meshes of her loveliness enervate him, till every other feeling which might have combated or rivalled her power was drowned and swept away. Passion, often likened by poets unto flame, does thus resemble it—that, once permitted dominion, it can no longer be kept in

servitude, but, mastering all before it, devours even that from which it springs. The strength which he had boasted could break “bonds of iron even as green withes” had ebbed away into a voluptuary’s weakness: and under the even, brilliant, modern life he had led through these eight months in Paris, there had rioted in him the same guilty love which revelled in possession of the Hittite’s wife, the same keen jealousy which slew Mariamne for a doubt in the days of old Judæa!

Lady Vavasour sat that evening in her loge at the Opera, Strathmore in attendance on her, as he had been throughout the winter wherever she went, the Duc de Vosges and Prince Michael of Tchemeidoff her visitors, for the *entrée* to her box, closely as it was besieged, was ever a privilege as exclusive as the Garter. Scandals, badinage, dainty flattery, choice wit lying in a single word, rumours which answered the “*Quid Novi?*” asked as perpetually in Paris as in the Violet City, circulated in her box; and she sat there in her dazzling youth, shrouded in black perfumed lace, like a Spanish gaditana, with the diamonds flashing here and there and gleaming starlike among her lustrous hair. Her coquetry of manner she could no more abandon than could a fawn its play, than a sapphire its sparkle; but, as I say, she never had fairly aroused that deadly jealousy which lay in wait within him, as a tiger lies ready to spring; though Strathmore, whose love was a sheer idolatry, as enthralled by her now as in the first mo-

ment when his kiss had touched her lips, begrimed every glance which fell on another.

“Strathmore has the monopoly now; how long will he keep it?” said the Duc de Vosges, as he left her box, while S.A.R. the Prince d’Etoiles entered it. “There are women who have *no* lovers perhaps (at least for our mothers’ credit we all say so), as there are women who use no rouge; but when once they begin to take to either, they add both fresh every day!”

“Peste!” said Arthus de Bellus, pettishly, “he has had it a great deal too long. He must have bewitched her in his old English château! If a whole winter is not an eternal constancy, what *is*?”

“And this is May!” pursued the Duc, reflectively; “but those Englishmen are resolute fellows; they hold their ground doggedly in battle as in love; there is no shaking them in either——”

“*Vrai!* There is only shooting them in both! If one picked a quarrel with my Lord Cecil, *par hazard*, and had him out——”

“He would shoot *you*, mon cher, and stand all the better with madame for it,” said the Duc, dryly. “Strathmore is the crack shot of Europe; he can hit the ruby in a woman’s ring riding full galop—saw him do it at Vienna!”

“Look, Cecil! There is your friend!” said Marion Vavasour, lifting her lorgnon to her eyes and glancing at the opposite side of the house.

“What an indefinite description!” laughed Strath-

more, lifting his slowly. “ We all have a million of friends as long as we are happily ignorant of what they say of us !”

“ *Tais toi* with your epigrams ! All social comfort lies in self-deception, we know that,” she laughed, with that glance beneath her silken lashes which had first fallen on him under the midsummer stars of Prague, and which still did with him what it would. “ There is your friend, your brother, your idol—the Beau Sabreur, as you call him—I hope he will not be shot like his namesake, Murat ; he is far too handsome ! Look ! it *is* he yonder, talking with Lord Beaume !”

“ Bertie ! so it is. What has he come to Paris for, I wonder ?”

Strathmore’s eyes lightened with pleasure, and his brightest smile passed over his face as he recognised Erroll ; his attachment to him was too thorough to have been cut away by those words, even bitter though they were, which had been exchanged between them in the cedar drawing-room at White Ladies.

She, glancing upward at him, saw the smile, and this woman, rapacious, exacting, merciless, with the panther nature under her delicate loveliness, permitted no thought to wander away from her, allowed no single feeling to share dominion with her ! And she prepared his chastisement.

“ What is he in Paris for ? To see me, I dare say ! *N'est ce pas assez?* Go and tell him to come

here ; he will not venture without," she said, carelessly, while she leaned a little forward and bowed to Erroll with an *envoi* from her fan, for which many men in the house that night would have paid down ten years of their lives.

How well she knew her lover, and knew her power over him ! The smile died off Strathmore's face, the dark, dangerous anger of his race glanced into his eyes.

"Pardon me if I decline the errand. I am not your *laquais de place*, Lady Vavasour !" he said, coldly, as he leaned over her chair. The answer was too low for those who were in the box to hear it.

She glanced at him amusedly and shrugged her shoulders slightly :

"Many would think themselves flattered by being even *that* ! Since you are refractory, there are others more obedient. M. de Lörn, will you be so good as to tell Major Erroll he may come and speak to us here ? There he is with Lord Beaume."

Lörn left the box on his errand, and Lady Vavasour turned to D'Etoiles. She was the reigning beauty of Paris still ; none dared to dispute with her the palm of pre-eminence. Sovereign of fashion, she bent sovereigns to her feet, created a mode with a word, and saw kings suitors to her for a smile. She must have surely, they thought, loved Strathmore strangely well, with more than the fleeting, capricious passions rumour accredited to her, that she allowed him so jealous and undivided

a sway over her; or—perchance it was that “the dove” still loved “to peck the estridge,” to tame this imperious will to more than woman’s weakness, and see this man, who boasted himself of bronze, grow pale if her glance but wandered from himself!

“For shame!” she murmured to him, as he bent for an emerald which had fallen from her bouquet-holder. “How rude you were. Do you not know my motto is Napoleon’s, *Qui m’aime me suit!*”

“Yes,” answered Strathmore, unsatisfied and unappeased; “but I do not see why you should care to be followed by so very many!”

She struck him a fragrant blow with her bouquet of stephanotis.

“If a vast crowd follow ever in vain, is it not the greater honour to be singled from so many? *Ingrat!*”

The idolatrous passion that was in him for Marion Vavasour, which bound him to her will, and made him hold his slavery sweeter than all duty, pride, or glory, gleamed in his eyes as he stooped towards her in the swell of a chorus of the “Puritani,” which drowned his words to any ear save hers:

“Ay! but love grudges the idlest word that is cast to others, the slightest glance that is bestowed elsewhere. There is no miser at once so avaricious and unreasonable!”

“Unreasoning indeed! You are much more fit for the days of Abelard and Héloïse than you are for these. No one loves so *now*—save ourselves!”

For the sweetness of the last word, as it lingered softly on her lips, murmured in the swell of the music, he forgave her the arch mockery of the first ; and the sirocco of jealousy which, once risen, never wholly subsides, lulled, and passed harmless away for the present.

Meanwhile, in Lord Beaume's *loge*, Erroll received his message ; received it with so much reluctance, almost repugnance in his tone and on his face, that the Comte de Lörn, who had only known him a Sir Calidore for courtesy and a very Richelieu for women, stared at him and shrugged his shoulders.

“Peste ! the greatest beauty of the day sends for you, and you are no more grateful to her than this ! And one must stand very well with her, too, to be invited to her box.”

“I have no desire to ‘stand well’ with Lady Vavasour,” said Erroll, impatiently, forgetting how strangely his answer must sound, for memories of this woman as he had last seen her at White Ladies stirred up bitterly within him ; about her, and her alone, passionate words had passed between him and the man he loved ; through her, and her alone, that blow had been struck to their friendship, from which friendship never rallies, howsoever dexterously the wound be healed.

“So much the better for you, for nobody has a chance of rivalling your friend, it seems. Allons ! you will hardly send her such a message back as that ?”

said the Frenchman, as he thought, “ Ah-ah ! the fox and the grapes ! ”

Erroll wavered a moment, uncertain how best to evade her summons : he felt an invisible reluctance, in truth ; did it not seem too exaggerated and cowardly a word, almost a dread to enter this woman’s presence ? He recognised her sorceress power, and feared it ; he knew her influence over Strathmore, and resented it ; he believed it wisdom to shun, foolhardihood to brave her ; he abhorred her nature, and he acknowledged her loveliness. Down at White Ladies, even whilst he had hated her for the dominion she exercised over Strathmore, and loathed her for the wanton passions she veiled beneath her delicate and poetic language, her soft and refined grace, he had felt the dazzling charm of that divine beauty sweep over and stagger him, as though her eyes had some necromantic spell.

Now, with all the stories that were rife of the utter bondage in which she held Strathmore, abhorrence is scarce too fierce a word for what Erroll felt for Marion Vavasour. Had there been a plausible pretext for leaving the house to avoid her he would have taken it ; already on his lips was an excuse to Lörn for his attendance to her *loge*, when, as she leaned forward to lorgner the prima donna, her glance met his, and he saw her, with the diamonds glancing in her bosom and her hair, and her lustrous eyes outshining the jewels. He hated her, condemned her,

feared her, approached her with aversion ; but that enchantment which Marion Vavasour exercised at will over temperaments the most diverse, hearts the most steeled to her, stole upon him as the syren's sea-song stole upon the mariners of Greece, though they turned their prow from the fatal music ; as the fumes of wine steal perforce upon a man, though he refuse to put wine even to his lips !

It seemed impossible to evade her summons ; he turned and followed the Comte de Lörn, as in this life we ever follow the slender thread of Accident which leads us to our fate.

“ What has brought you to Paris ? Anything special ? ” asked Strathmore, when Lady Vavasour, having given him a smile and a few words of negligent graceful courtesy, continued her conversation with D’Etoiles.

The hot words that had been passed between them had been allowed to drop into oblivion by both—freely forgiven by the one who had had right on his side ; not so freely by the one who had been in error, for it was one of the worst traits among many darker that belonged to men of his race and blood, that a Strathmore *never pardoned*.

“ My uncle’s illness,” answered Erroll. “ He was knocked over at Auteuil by paralysis ; they telegraphed for me some days ago, but this is the first time I have left him. It will prove a fatal, they tell me, though perhaps a lingering, affair.”

“ My dear fellow, I must be ‘ extremely glad and

vastly sorry' in one breath—the first for your inheritance, the last for your uncle!" smiled Strathmore. "Poor Sir Arthur—I wonder I never heard of it; will he last long?"

"He may die any day; he may linger on for many months; so the doctors say at least, but they always hedge admirably in their prognostications, so that, whether their patient be cured or killed *they* are always in the right! I fear there can be no chance for him."

"Fear, Bertie!—on your honour, now?" said Strathmore.

All the old baronet's estates were willed by him to Erroll (his title he naturally succeeded to); a property not extensive, but of high value to a cavalry man in debt and in difficulties.

"On my honour! What will come to me will set me free in very many ways; but to rejoice in a man's death because you reap by it, would be semi-murder."

"My dear fellow," cried Strathmore, "we all break the Decalogue in our *thoughts* every hour with impunity, and in our acts, too, if we're not detected:

Le scandale du monde est ce qui fait l'offence,
Et ce n'est pas pécher que pécher en silence!

Tartuffe's the essence of modern ethics!"

"Ethics! Murder! Death! Quelle horreur! What *are* you talking about?" interrupted Lady Vavasour, catching fragmentary sentences, and turning her head, with her eyebrows arched in surprised inquiry, as the Royal Duke bowed his congé and left

her to go to the box of a scarcely more notorious, though a less legitimate lionne, who had not a coronet to leaven her frailties. “What horrible words to bring into my presence! Are you going to quit the world and organise a new La Trappe, Major Erroll?”

“Not exactly! Though truly there are living beauties that might drive us to as fatal a despair as the dead loveliness of the Duchesse de Montbazon awoke in the Trappist founder!” answered Erroll, almost involuntarily.

The eyes that dwelt on him, the subtle spell that stole about him, seemed to wrench homage from him to this woman in the very teeth of his aversion and his condemnation of her, as if to justify the taunt and the suspicion that Strathmore had thrown in his teeth at White Ladies, and to make him by his own words prove himself a liar!

Strathmore’s eyes flashed swiftly on him, and a contemptuous smile came upon his face. The thought that prompted it did Erroll as rank an injustice as evil judgment ever wrought in a world where its wrong verdicts are as many as the sands of the sea, and its restitutions so tardy that they are rarely offered, save—to the dead.

Marion Vavasour smiled—her moqueur, radiant, resistless smile.

“Well, it is a proof of woman’s omnipotence that love for her was even the cause and the corner-stone of the most rigid monastic establishment that ever abjured her! Have you been long in Paris?”

"Only a few days. I am staying in attendance on an invalid relative at Auteuil."

"Auteuil! Ah, we go there in a week or so to my *maisonnette*. We shall be charmed to see you, Major Erroll, whenever you can make your escape from your melancholy duty."

He bowed, and thanked her. For the few words of invitation many peers of France and England would have laid down half the trappings of their rank! He acknowledged them, but chillily; he could not pardon her for her work; he could not forgive her the estrangement between him and the man he held closer than a brother; he could not see Strathmore under the dominance, and by the side of the woman who ensnared and enslaved him, without bitterness of heart. He read her aright, this sorceress, who could summon at will every phase of womanhood; and his instinct and his reason alike allied to give out against her an uncompromising verdict.

With but cold courtesy he made his adieux, and left her box as soon as it was possible to do so, having satisfied the bare obligations of politeness her message had entailed on him. And yet, despite all this, as Erroll drove away from the Opera towards the Maison Dorée that night, the remembrance, which involuntarily uprose to him, of a pure and childlike loveliness, dedicated solely to him, which he had often watched when hushed in the repose of a sleep whose very dreams were haunted by no other image, and murmured of no other name than his own, was rivalled

and thrust aside by what he strove to put away from him—the memory of the glance which had just met his, like the blinding rays of a dazzling light. Strong and close about him was the treasure of a warm and holy love; but if even such a love be a silver shield in hours of temptation to the man who wears it (though rarely, I deem, is it so, as poets picture and as women dream), it could not ward off the charmed lance of Marion Vavasour's fascination. Her memory followed him through the gas-lit streets to the Maison Dorée; her memory haunted him still when he left the laughing companions of his opera-supper, and drove through the grey dawn of the early June morning back to Auteuil. Are we masters of our own fate, or are we not rather playthings in the hands of circumstances and chance, floated by them against our will, as thistle-down upon the winds that waft it? It is an open question! Half the world mar their own lives, and the other half are marred by life.

“Now, Cecil, what cause was there for you to look as stern as Othello, and to assert that you were not my *laquais de place* to-night, when I merely paid an ordinary courtesy to your friend because he *is* your friend? You are as jealous as a Spaniard, and as ungrateful—as a man always is for that matter, so there is no need for a simile!” said Lady Vavasour that night, after her own opera-supper, when Etoiles, the Duc de Vosges, and others who had formed her

guests at that most charming of all *soupers à minuet*, had left.

The light shone down upon her where she leaned back on a dormeuse, her perfumed laces drooping off her snowy shoulders, and the diamonds glancing above her fair Greek-like brow. They were alone; the Marquis was as polite a host to Strathmore as the Marquis du Châtelet to Voltaire; and Strathmore bent his head and kissed the fragrant lips that mocked him with such sweet laughter.

“Ma belle! there is cold love where there is no jealousy! Love waits for no *reason* in its acts; it only knows that it hates those who rob it of the simplest word, and is jealous of the very brute that wins a touch or a smile!”

She laughed as his hand pushed away from her a little priceless toy dog, gift of the Prince d’Etoiles, which had nestled in her lace.

“I tell you you are fit for the old days of Venice, when a too daring look was revenged with the dagger! Nobody loves so now; we are too languid, and too wise; and two years ago you would have sworn never to love so yourself, Cecil.”

“Even so. But two years ago I had not met *you*.”

“No. How strangely we met, too, those summer evenings in Bohemia! I told you it was Destiny.”

He smiled.

“My loveliest! I do not think there is much ‘destiny’ in this life beyond that which men’s hands

fashion for themselves, and women's beauty works for them. But if fate would always use me as it did then, I would never ask other guidance."

She laughed, that soft low laugh, which in its most mellow sweetness had always a ring of triumph and of mockery difficult to define, yet ever menacing in its music.

"It was destiny! Let me keep to my creed. Bah! Life is governed by chance, and each of us, at best, is but a leaf that drifts on a hazardous wind, now in the sunlight, and now in the shadow; and the winds blow the leaves hap-hazard together, for evil, for good, whichever it be."

And Lady Vavasour laughed again at her own careless philosophies; a true epicurean, life had its most golden charm for her, and turned to her its sunniest side; her foot was on the neck of the world, and the world lay obedient, and enraptured by its enslaver; Emperors obeyed a sign of her fan, how should Fate ever dare to turn rebel against her?

Then that sadness, which gave to her gazelle eyes their most dangerous sweetness, came over them; she assumed by turns, and at will, every shape and caprice, now heartless and *moquante* as the world she reigned over, now tender and full of thought, as the women of whom poets dream in their youth.

"Ah, Cecil! I have taught you a better love than the Age and the Power you once coveted? And yet —who knows?—perhaps Ambition was the safer and the wiser, though not the more faithful, mistress."

His eyes dwelt, with all the passion which she had awakened in him, on the living picture before him, on which the light of the chandeliers shone, enhancing all its wondrous brilliance of tint, and its rare grace of form. His idolatry outweighed the world, shrivelled ambition as a scroll of paper shrivels in the flames, and filled his past, his present, and his future, only with Herself !

“I do not know—I do not care !” he said, passionately, whilst his lips were hot against her cheek. “For the love you have taught me, I would barter life and sell eternity ! Ambition—it is dead in me ! You are my world. I have forgot all others.”

God pardon him ! It was fatally true. And she looked up softly in his eyes, his slavery was sweet homage to her power, his insanity precious incense to her vanity ; and as she knew that she was all the world to him, so she whispered him he was to her. She had vowed him so many times, with her enchantress tongue, her fragrant lips, her eloquence of eye and word—so she vowed him now.

“Ah, Cecil !” she murmured, with that caressing sweetness which was as resistless as the song of the serpent-charmer, “we do not love the less, but the more, because the world sometimes robs us of each other, and would sever us if it could by its laws !”

CHAPTER XX.

BELLA DEMONIA CON ANGELICO RISO.

THE Bosquet de Diane was situated midway between Auteuil and Passy, in one of the most charming retreats of those pleasant places; nestled among sycamore and lime-woods, catching from its terraces a distant view of the spires of Paris, and a nearer of the windings of the Seine, with a paradise of roses beaming in its gardens, and the luxury of a *séрай* lavished on its interior. Hither, in the sultry heats of early summer, when the thermometer was 38 deg. Réaumur, came Marion Lady Vavasour, after a lengthened Paris season, with a choice *cohue* of courtiers and guests, to head a circle scarce less brilliant than that adjacent at St. Cloud; to pass her mornings, forming new sumptuary laws and despotic edicts of fashion; to frame fêtes à la Watteau in her rose-gardens, or in her private theatre; to spend her

time as became the Marchioness of Vavasour and Vaux, and the Queen of Society.

As it chanced, joining the grounds of her *maisonette*, lay the grounds of a cozy bachelor-villa, that had been long inhabited by an old English *bon viveur*, who, with very good taste, preferred Auteuil, and all to which Auteuil lies near, to his own baronial hall down in the dulness of Shropshire, where there was not a decent dinner-party to be had nearer than twenty miles as the crow flew.

The *bon viveur* was Sir Arthur Erroll, and the villa was, naturally, the Paris residence of his nephew, who had been summoned when a fit of paralysis threatened a sure, though a gradual, death for the baronet. The windows of the villa looked on to the glades of lindens and the aisles of roses, which formed the choicest portion of the grounds of the Bosquet de Diane; and, sitting in Sir Arthur's sick chamber, Erroll had full view of the Decamerone-like groups which strolled there in the luminous evenings, and had ever before him, as Lady Vavasour moved in the moonlight or the sunset radiance through the arcades of her orangeries, or down the length of her terraces, a living picture which united the rich glory of Giorgone with the aërial grace of Greuze. Perchance this constant, yet distant view of her, was more dangerous than closer neighbourhood; through it, perforce, she haunted his solitude, and usurped his thoughts.

Of necessity detained at Auteuil, he could not shut

away what rose before his sight almost as regularly as the evening stars themselves. He avoided visiting at the *maisonette* as much as he could possibly do; to have constantly refused would have been to place himself in the absurd light of *censor morum* to Strathmore, and fostered rather than disabused the jealous error into which Strathmore had fallen, regarding the motive of his interference, the autumn before, at White Ladies. Still he went thither very rarely; but he could not walk through the Bois, or drive down the Versailles road, without encountering her carriage or her riding parties; and, when he sat beside the open casements of his uncle's chamber, he could not refuse his admiration to the brilliant and graceful form surrounded with her court, which came ever within his sight, when she swept slowly along the marble terraces, or beneath the avenues of her rose-gardens in the starlit summer night. He ceased to wonder at Strathmore's infatuated passion —he ceased to marvel that, for this woman's loveliness, he flung away fame, time, ambition, everything that had before been precious to him, like dross; and, almost unconsciously and irresistibly, Erroll ceased also to care to drive over to dine at the Café de Paris, and sup in the Bréda Quartier, as he had done hitherto, but stayed, in preference, to sit beside the window of an old man's sick-room, with some opened novel, on which his eyes never glanced.

Perhaps Lady Vavasour perceived how markedly her own invitations were refused, yet how surely

a lorgnon watched her from the balcony of Sir Arthur's villa that was visible through the limes; or perhaps she divined and resented the verdict her lover's friend gave against her? "Major Erroll is very rude. I have asked him to dinner three times, and he has three times 'deeply regretted' &c. &c.—*Anglicè*, refused! I have shown him courtesy for your sake, Cecil; now show him resentment for mine. I will *not* have you sworn friends with the man; he does not like **ME**!" said her ladyship, laughingly, one morning to a lover with whom her word was law, and who thought, as two scenes at White Ladies arose to his memory, "Perhaps he but likes you too well!"

The few phrases sufficed to sow afresh the doubt in Strathmore's mind, and increased the coolness that had come betwixt him and Erroll, whom Marion Vavasour treated with an absolute indifference, though occasionally she watched him with something of that curiosity which a flattered, spoiled, and beautiful woman might well feel for the only one who had ever dared to show her his disapprobation, and been proof against her charm; and occasionally her eyes lighted and dwelt on the rare beauty of his face with a look which meant—it were hard to say what—perhaps a challenge.

"Major Erroll, pray why do you persistently shun us?" she asked him, suddenly, forsaking the negligence with which she had hitherto habitually treated him, as was natural from a proud and courted beauty to a man who had ventured to be ungrateful for her

condescensions, and to show tacit rebuke of her conduct, without the prestige of a high rank to excuse him the insolence. It was one of those days when he had been compelled to come to the Bosquet de Diane, invited too publicly as he encountered them in the Bois, when riding there with one of Louis Philippe's equerries, to be able to refuse without drawing comment. They were for the moment almost alone, as they strolled through the gardens after dinner under the arcades of roses, while the starlight shone down on her, burnishing her hair to its marvellous lustre, and glancing off the Byzantine jewels above her brow, while the shadow of the night, half veiling her beauty, gave it a dream-like softness. She knew so well when it was at its rarest and its most resistless !

“Shun you ?” he repeated. “Lady Vavasour can surely never do herself so little justice as to deem such a rudeness to her possible ?” Courtesy demanded the reply, and he gave it only coldly.

“I deem it possible because it is the fact,” she laughed carelessly. “Come, I never am refused or kept waiting, why do you do it ?”

“It is much honour to me that you should even remark a discourtesy if I have been guilty of it,” he answered, coldly still. He condemned and abhorred the nature which he read aright in her, and yet—his voice softened despite himself as he looked down upon her.

“You answer by an equivoque ? For shame ! I

never permit evasions. Say frankly, Major Erroll, the truth—that you dislike me !”

As she spoke she turned her eyes full on him, their liquid darkness laughing with a light as of amusement that any mortal could be found so mad as to defy her power, so blind as to resist such loveliness ; a light that flashed on him with its dazzling regard, challenging him to treasure hatred if he could, to preserve defiance if he dared, to Marion Lady Vavasour.

“ Come,” she repeated, a haughty nonchalance in her attitude as she turned her head towards him, while she swept through the fragrant aisles of her gardens, but with a mocking, amused smile about her lips—“ come ! the truth now, you dislike me ?”

“ Say, rather, Lady Vavasour, that I dread your power, and that—since you ask for frankness—I perhaps condemn its too pitiless exercise, its most pitiful results !”

They were rash and daring words to the pampered beauty, who heard the truth as rarely as a sovereign in her palace ! They were spoken on the impulse of a frank nature and a loyal friendship, as Erroll’s clear eyes turned on her steadily, with the first reproof that any living being had ever dared to offer to Marion Vavasour. From that moment his fate was sealed with her.

The glance she first gave him was one of grand amazement, of haughty indignation ; then this woman, in whom was combined every fairest phase of woman’s witcheries, and who could assume at her will any

lying loveliness she would, looked at him with a faint blush wavering her cheek, and her lashes slightly drooping over her eyes, that lost their malicious laughter, and grew almost sad.

“Then you are unjust, and err in hasty judgment, a common error of your sex,” she said, gently, almost mournfully. “Bah! you might as well condemn the sun that shone on the *Ægean*, because the blind and the unwise bowed down to it as God! You are prejudiced. *N’importe!* when you know me better you will not do me so much wrong.”

And for the moment, as he listened, he forgot that she who spoke was the arch-coquette of Europe, was the avowed mistress of Strathmore; he forgot that those words on her lips were a graceful lie without meaning, only uttered as the actress utters the words of the rôle she assumes for the hour. They stood alone in the starlight, about them the heavy perfume of the roses that roofed the trellised aisle and strewed the path: and as she leant slightly towards him in the shadow, while her eyes seemed to glisten, and her rich lips to part with a sigh, words broke from him unawares, wrenched out against his will by this woman’s sorceress’ charm.

“Let us know you as we may, you do with us what you will! Lady Vavasour, for God’s sake take heed—have mercy—you hold a fearful power in your hands!”

His tone bore more meaning than his speech, which was rapid and broken, and his prayer, in its

very warning, only bore fresh incense to her triumphs. Her eyes dwelt softly on him, and the warm hue still lingered temptingly, flatteringly, on the cheek that had no charm so perfect as its blush. Then she laughed gaily as she turned away, the Byzantine gems gleaming in the star-rays. "Power? Bah! over an hour's rest, a moment's pique, an evening's homage! *C'est grand' chose!*"

With this careless, coquettish mockery she left him, and was joined by Strathmore and the Duc de Vosges; and Erroll, turning suddenly away, strode down the rose-walk in the moonlight at a swift, uneven pace, not to return to the Bosquet de Diane that night. Twelve months before, he had sworn, in that certain remorse which comes to all men when they return to one who has been faithful to them in absence, with a reading of fidelity which they have never followed, that no other love should ever supplant or efface his Wife, sworn it in all sincerity, believing that he should guard his oath sacred and unbroken. She was very dear to him still, dear as our purer thoughts, our better moments, our most holy memories are dear to us; he loved her fondly, truly, deeply; yet, the holier love was but a frail shield against the unholier, which swept on him with a sirocco's strength, hated yet insidious. *Mes frères!* did ever yet the silvery wings of your better angel so wholly enshroud you, that they made you blind to the laughing eyes of the bacchantes that beset your path, and banned from your sight the

wreathing arms and wooing lips that lured you into error? Never, most surely, out of the happy fables of women's credence, and of poet's song.

POWER!

It was the idol of Marion Vavasour's religion, in one form; as in another, ere she had supplanted it, it had been her lover's. She warped and used it pitilessly; and though she had disowned it, never exercised it more capriciously and mercilessly than over Strathmore, now that she had set her foot on his bent neck, and bound him into slavery. No toy was so dear to this tyrant as the imperious and unyielding nature she had bowed like a reed in her hands! No pastime so precious to her as to show, by a hundred fresh ingenuities, how pliant as straw to her bidding was the steel of his will and his pride!

"From whom is that letter, Strathmore?" she asked one evening in the rose-gardens, her favourite haunt, where she sat with him, the Duc de Vosges, and an English Viscountess.

The letter just brought him was from a British minister arrived in Paris for a European congress, and he passed it to her; his will had sunk so absolutely into hers, that he neither seemed conscious of her dominion or his own degradation.

She arched her delicate brows as she read.

"This evening? You cannot wait on him this evening. We play 'Hernani.'"

"I fear it is impossible for me to avoid going; you see what is said," he answered her. "The Earl

would take no excuse in a matter of so much import——”

“He *must* take it, if I choose you to send him one. You cannot go, Strathmore; I need you specially.”

“But indeed, since he does me the honour to desire this interview, I could not refuse it without marked slight, not alone to himself, but almost to the Government at home.”

Lady Vavasour made a *moue mutine*. She knew a lovely woman is never lovelier than when she will not hear reason.

“The Government? What is that to me? You are to play Hernani, and that is of far more consequence!”

“But I assure you——” began Strathmore, while Lady Mostyn listened amusedly, and he caught a smile on the face of the French Duke that he bitterly resented: his rivals Strathmore kept utterly at a distance. *She* had him in thraldom, but they had not.

“Well? what? I cannot have my theatricals disarranged to pleasure your Earl, especially as he is a person I most particularly dislike. What would be the consequence, pray, of your neglecting his summons?”

“I have said, it would be little less than an insult to Allonby in his ministerial capacity, and——”

“Insult him, then!” cried her ladyship, with charming nonchalance. “And *après*? ”

Strathmore stooped towards her and lowered his voice for her ear alone.

“Après? Very natural offence from him personally, and great injury to my own future career, from neglecting the opportunity he affords me.”

“*Galimatias!* I cannot have my tragedy spoiled for the Ministry’s farce,” she answered aloud, with a slight shrug of her shoulders. “You must send an excuse to the Earl, or”—and she dropped her voice—“if you insult me with divided allegiance, Cecil, I shall receive none. You used to boast Age and Power were all you coveted. You may go back to your old loves if you disobey *me*.”

Perhaps it was that she felt jealous of her old rival, Ambition; perhaps it was merely to see her own power in its wanton completeness; but her eyes dwelt on him with the glance that, from her to him, commanded all things.

“Well!” she asked impatiently, “do you obey Lord Allonby or me? Which? I never share a sceptre.”

A flush passed over Strathmore’s face almost of anger; the look he caught on the face of Vosges reminded him for once of how completely he—a courtier, a diplomatist, a man of the world, who had sneered with his most bitter wit at love and all its follies—had become the slave of one passion, weak as water in the hands of one woman!

“Well? Which?” asked Marion Vavasour, with her charming petulance, and by the light in her eyes he knew that his capricious imperious tyrant would perchance resent disobedience in this trifle on which her will was set, more than a far heavier

disloyalty. And so great was his idolatry, that even with lookers-on at his degradation, he—who had held his will as bronze, and had boasted his self-dominion as omnipotent—let her rule him even in this wanton caprice.

He bowed his assent to her :

“ What Lady Vavasour wishes is a command.”

It was a strange oversight which, for a mere frivolous tyranny, made Lady Vavasour detain him that night at the Bosquet de Diane.

An hour afterwards, when the sun had sunk, and the ladies had re-entered the *maisonette* to dress for dinner, Strathmore, at her request, remained behind them, and took his way to the stables to look at her favourite mare, which had been lamed in exercising that morning, and which she would not leave solely to the care of stud-grooms and farriers.

It was dusk, and the second dressing-bell had rung, when, as he returned from the stables through the thick shrubberies which filled that part of the grounds, he stumbled against a female form, which crouched upon the ground in a position so suspicious of some thieving design, that he laid his hold upon her clothes, and bade her get up with no very gentle epithet. The woman shook his grasp off by a rapid movement, rose with a spring like a young doe, and stood confronting him, without any sign of guilt or fear, though her gipsy look, and dusty dress, confirmed him in his opinion that her errand lay towards any costly trifles, or loose jewels, which the open

windows and vacated rooms of the *maisonette* might let her make away with undetected.

She did not seem to hear the words he spoke to her; but her eyes dwelt on him curiously and earnestly, while a smile, half melancholy, half bitter, played about her lips; and as he scanned her face in the fading light, he recognised in its dark Murillo beauty the Bohemian woman who had taken his gold, and prophesied his future, under the Czeschen limes. The prophecy and the prophetess would alike have been long forgotten, but for the one who had heard and seen them with him.

“What!” said the Zingara, in the Czeschen patois, her mournful and monotonous tones falling dreamily on his ear—“what! the love is born already?—the yellow hair has drawn you in its net so soon? Take care! take care! Your kiss is not the first, nor will it be the last, on her lips——”

“Peace to your jargon!” broke in Strathmore, imperatively, catching enough of the words to incense him. “What are you doing here, an idle vagrant prowling about to steal?”

She threw herself back with a proud fierce gesture, the blood staining her bronze cheek, and a sinister light flashing in her eyes, that were darkly brilliant as those midnight stars from which, in olden days, her ancient race had prophesied to kings the fate of empires; by which now, in a strange travesty of their old fame and faith, they babbled to peasant-girls of love-predictions. “Steal!” she muttered in the

Czeschen dialect. “Steal—from *her* house! I would not drink a stoup of water that was *hers*, to save myself from dying.”

The words were so fiercely spoken, that Strathmore, catching them imperfectly, thought he must have mistaken a language which, though known to him was unfamiliar, and laid his grasp upon her afresh.

“You must give some very good account of yourself, or I shall turn you over to the gendarmes. You are in private grounds at nightfall, and are here on no honest errand.”

She turned her eyes on him half haughtily, half mournfully, with the same gaze with which she had studied his face under the Bohemian limes, and unconsciously his hand relaxed its hold and left her free. The regard, while it shamed the suspicion which accused her of low theft, struck him with the same chill as when her vague words had traced out his future in Bohemia. An artist would have given that look to the changeless and fathomless eyes of the Eumenides.

“I have no need to thieve,” said the Bohemian, quietly and proudly, “and my errand I will not tell you—now. In a little time, when you hate where you still love, you may share it—not yet. The sin is fair in your sight, and the kiss is sweet on your lips to-night; when the sin bears its curse, and the kiss has turned to gall, come to me; Redempta will show you your vengeance.”

She turned swiftly, and had passed away in the gloom through the trees before he could arrest her; taking advantage of the pause of involuntary hesitation which he made, as he debated with himself whether this woman was a maniac, or whether again he might not have misunderstood the Czeschen dialect, rendered doubly unfamiliar as it was by the gipsy patois she employed.

His eyes vainly sought her in the twilight. She was out of sight; and, disinclined to enter on the chase himself, he passed into the house, and apprising some of the servants that a beggar-woman was loitering suspiciously about the grounds, bade them have diligent search made for her. His order was obeyed; but the Bohemian was nowhere discovered. She had made her way through the twilight like a night-bird, and left as little trace of her path.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BROODING OF THE STORM.

“HERNANI” was never better acted at the Français than it was in the Marchioness’s private theatre that sultry midsummer night. So many people were staying at the Bosquet de Diane that no other audience was needed, and save one of the Royal Dukes from St. Cloud, Erroll was the only *externe* guest. A little note with but half a dozen lines in it had been sent over to Sir Arthur’s villa, signed “Marion Vavasour and Vaux.” That very morning Erroll had vowed to leave Auteuil as soon as his uncle’s death or recovery released him, and while forced to remain there to go no more to the *maisonette*; but—*l’homme propose, et femme dispose!* The few lines of gracious courtesy and airy raillery on his eremite tastes invited him that evening, and broke asunder all his freshly-forged resolves!

From her bijou theatre, of which Lady Vavasour

was singularly fond, actors and audience met again in the supper-room, decorated à la Louis Quinze, where she loved to revive the petits soupers that came in with the Regency and went out with the Revolution. These suppers were a peculiar charm of the Bosquet de Diane, and to-night one of the most brilliant of them followed on "Hernani," at which the sparkle of the wit might fairly have vied with the mots of Claudine de Tencin, Piron, or Rivarol; at which the Duc de Vosges, regarding his hostess, began to ponder that the advice of Arthus de Bellus might after all be the best, and that it would be well to shoot a lover whom there seemed no chance of supplanting; and at which Erroll's mots were so sparkling and his spirits so high, that some of the men there wondered to themselves if he were bent on eclipsing Strathmore.

The supper lasted long, every one loth to leave a table at which he was so well amused, and with the introduction of those perfumed cigarettes which Lady Vavasour permitted to be smoked in her presence, and which scented the air with a delicate Oriental odour, fresh jeux de mots seemed introduced, and it was very late when the Bourbon Prince took his departure. Son Altesse Royal was always cordially gracious and *en bon camarade* with Strathmore, whom he detained now at the door of his carriage, saying some last words relative to the Sartory Stakes, for which their horses were respectively entered; and when he rolled away, Strathmore stood

outside the house a few moments, while Lord Vavasour left the entrance-hall after accompanying the Duc to his carriage. The air was pleasant, for the night was very sultry and oppressive, as with the near approach of a tempest; it reminded him of the one, now near twelve months past, when the first words of love had passed his lips to Marion Vavasour, and he had thrust into his breast the crimson leaves that had been pressed against her lips; it was she only of whom he thought now as he paced up and down, while the dawn broke above the woods to the east. His passion had this characteristic of a worthier love—that its success had not weakened, but tenfold strengthened it, and her memory alone filled his thoughts now in the hot, hushed stillness. She was his! and he would have driven out of his path the boldest that had dared to seek her love, he would have revenged with death the fairest rivalry, that had dared to usurp his place.

Some twenty minutes might have gone by when, as he turned to re-enter the *maisonette* by one of the French windows which stood open to the piazza, the figure of a man came between him and the moonlight, he did not see whether from the villa or the grounds, though a moment after he recognised Erroll. They met as the one left, and the other turned to enter, the house, met for the first time alone since the day at White Ladies, when words about a woman, rash on the one side, bitter on the other, had laid the edge of the axe at the root of their friendship.

In a clearer light, or when his own thoughts had been less preoccupied, Strathmore must have noticed the change that had come over Erroll in the short half-hour that had gone by from the time of the Duc's departure, when he had been laughing and talking at the supper-table with all its usual gaiety, and even more than his usual wit. Then, his mots had sparkled through the conversation, dropped out in his soft, lazy voice, and his laugh had rung as often and as clearly as a young girl's—now, his face was haggard and lined, and as he pulled the Glengarry over his eyes his hand shook slightly, like the hand of a man who has been drinking deeply, which was scarcely the case with him, since he had never left the society of titled women.

Strathmore, however, did not observe this; it was very dark just then, as the clouds swept over the moon, and the lights from Lady Vavasour's villa, which were streaming full in his own eyes, dazzled them, while Erroll stood with his back to their blaze.

"I thought you had left us, Bertie. Have a cigar?" he began, holding out his own case. "What a hot night, isn't it? There's a storm brewing. We shall have it down in half an hour."

"It looks dark," said Erroll, briefly, as he struck a fusee.

"Mild word! How sweetly those limes smell; rather oppressive, though. I will walk across the grounds with you to Sir Arthur's; how is he to-day?"

“Not much better.”

“Well, really that tyrannous old gentleman has lived quite long enough,” laughed Strathmore, as he moved down the terrace steps. “I want you to have that Hurstwood property, the timber is magnificent. What do you think of Milly Mostyn?—lovely figure, hasn’t she? Only, unluckily, some wicked fellows *do* say it is sadly fictitious, and disappears when her maid disrobes her.”

“We’re often tricked in that way,” laughed Erroll. But the laugh was forced, and he pulled his cap down over his eyes as they walked on under the limes and across the lawn of Marion Vavasour’s rose-gardens, Strathmore talking to a spaniel of hers, that had run after and leapt upon him—a beautiful creature with a collar of silver bells. Erroll glanced at the spaniel as they strolled on in silence farther, and a bitter, haggard smile came on his face. “She caresses you to-night—she will caress me to-morrow—and a German Prince or a French Duc the next day!”

Strathmore laughed slightly; his laugh had a peculiar intonation; it was not often that it warmed, but rather chilled.

“Poor Bonbon! How severe you are on her. What has she done to deserve such philippies?”

“Nothing! She merely made me think that she strangely resembles—her mistress!”

“Her mistress!” repeated Strathmore. He hated to hear the name of Marion Vavasour spoken by any.

"Your remark is open to an odd construction, Erroll ; what do you mean by it ?"

Erroll swung round and paused where they now stood, under the limes in the midst of Lady Vavasour's gardens, nothing near them but the night birds, which swept with a swift rush through the foliage, fleeing to refuge before the storm—nothing watching them but the quick lustrous eyes of the dog, that glanced rapidly from one to the other.

"Strathmore ! do you believe *now* in the love of that woman as you did twelve months ago ?"

"To the full."

The answer was mild as yet, but Strathmore's eyes were beginning to glitter coldly and angrily. Of all things, he hated his personal feelings to be probed, his personal matters touched.

"What !" broke in Erroll ; his manner was utterly changed from its usual soft and lazy nonchalance, and his words were spoken by hoarse, abrupt efforts. "What ! you are as mad about her, then, as you were a year ago ! You never see—you never think——"

Strathmore laughed a little again, more chillily than before :

"My dear Erroll ! a year before you were so good as to intrude your counsels on me—pray don't be at the trouble to repeat them. I bore rather ill with your interference then, I may do so still worse now."

"Bear with it as you will ! but do you mean to tell me, then, that, arch coquette as Marion Vavasour is,

you are mad, blind, infatuated enough to believe she will for ever——”

“‘For ever’ is a word for fools,” interrupted Strathmore, with his chilliest smile; “even forbearance will not last ‘for ever,’ if it be tried too far, as *you* take a fancy to try it to-night!”

“For God’s sake, do not let our friendship be broken for *her*!” muttered Erroll, with so strange a vehemence and pain that the spaniel, Bonbon, jumped upon him, whining plaintively. “It will stay by us when all the women’s love on earth has rotted out of our hands—do not let *her* destroy it!”

“Faugh!” said Strathmore, with contemptuous impatience. “If we had left the ladies’ presence at supper, I should say our good host the Marquis’s wine had got in your head, mon cher! The duration or rupture of our *entente cordiale* lies in your own choice; all I beg of you is, cease to meddle with my private matters. I must take the liberty to remind you, that you are neither my keeper nor my father-confessor!”

Strathmore’s words were light, sneering, and cold: such, flung at a man in a moment of high excitement, keen suffering, and strong feeling, are like ice-water flung on flames; they came so now to Erroll, and on this spur he said, what else might never have passed his lips.

“You must be a madman or a fool, Strathmore!” he broke in hotly and quickly. “I do not want to be your confessor, to see that you are fettered hand

and foot. It is no secret now, you never attempt to keep it so. You are the slave of her idlest caprice, you are utterly chained and infatuated by her—all the world sees it. It is a thing publicly and plainly known enough. Men jest and jeer over it!—”

“Because they envy it—as perhaps *you* do?”

“They ridicule you behind your back,” went on Erroll, hurriedly, not noticing (or evading) the sneer, which was all the more cutting for its tranquillity. “I tell you what they—sneaks and cowards—only say out of your hearing. You have no will of your own with her—she rules you as she pleases. Great Heavens! can you make such a byword of your name, such a wreck of your ambition, for the sheer sake of this wanton adulteress!”

“Silence!”

The word hissed out on the air like the ring of a bullet. The black, silent wrath of his vengeful race glared in Strathmore’s eyes till they gleamed like steel, and he turned away with a smile that had darker meaning in it than the hottest fury, or menace, that could have shaped themselves in oaths or words.

“I should shoot any one else dead for that to-morrow morning. I do not need to say our acquaintance-ship ceases from to-night? *Bonbon, ma belle, allons nous en! Voilà la pluie qui tombe.*”

He moved away with a low and punctilious bow of contemptuous courtesy; but with a sudden movement Erroll swung round and stood before him in the path;

in the yellow moonlight his face looked very pale, and the nerves of his lips twitched under his moustaches.

“Stop! we shall not part like that!”

They stood face to face in the middle of Marion Vavasour’s paradise of flowers, while the first storm-drops fell among the leaves above head slowly one by one, and the garish light of the moon, which looked duskily red against the clouds, strayed in streaks across the darkness.

“Wait a moment!” Erroll’s voice was thick as he spoke, and shook slightly. “I risked death for you once, I would do it again to-night. We have lived, and shared, and thought together, as though the same mother had borne us. We have not prated about it like boys, but we have held each other closer than men of the same blood do. We never had an evil word between us till *she* brought them. Strathmore! is all *that* to be swept away in a single night?”

The words were more eloquent by feeling than they were by rhetoric; they would have softened most men: Strathmore they did not even touch. He stood with his arms folded and his cigarette in his mouth, while his face wore its darkest, deadliest scorn. When his will was crossed, his wrath was roused, or his pride touched, the man was bronze; words could not scathe, pity could not stir, memory could not soften him. Once his glance grew a little gentler, it was at Erroll’s first words; but it soon

passed away, and the merciless scoff set on his lips again.

“ You are admirably theatrical ! but we are not playing ‘ Hernani ’ now, and I should prefer that we used the language of gentlemen. It is sad waste of stage-talent, and I should like fewer phrases and more rational ones ! Lady Vavasour can in no way be charged with having caused the ‘ evil words ’ you speak of ; you have only yourself to thank for them by your madman’s conduct, and by your very marked insolence to me. Be so good as to oblige me by letting me pass ? ”

“ Not yet,” swore Erroll, between his teeth ; a hot flush had come on his face, and his eyes were excited ; Strathmore’s words cut him to the quick, less for their insult, than their chill and mocking heartlessness. “ You insult me for her sake—you turn against me because I tell you frankly what all your friends and enemies say with one voice behind your back—because I seek to warn you against your insane belief, your wretched slavery, with a wanton coquette, a titled courtezan ? What if I told you she were faithless to you ? ”

For an instant the words struck Strathmore like a shot, and he made one fierce swift panther-like movement, as though to spring upon and rend limb from limb the man that dared to whisper this thing to him ; then he restrained himself, and laughed a low, cold, imperious laugh of contempt and of power ; he took the cigarette leisurely from his lips, and his eyes, that

glittered like a furious hawk's, fastened on Erroll with deadly significance.

"What!" he said, slowly, and gently winding a loosened leaf round the cigar. "What? Why, you would give me your life for the lie, that is all."

"But if I could prove to you that it were true?"

"Prove it, then! You have dared to hint it, dare to make it good!" hissed Strathmore through his teeth, where he leaned forward as a boar-hound strains to leap upon his foes, while the leash holds him back from the death-grip.

The blood rushed to Erroll's face, staining it crimson; his head sank like a man suddenly and sorely stricken; he stood motionless in the still and sultry night.

"Prove it, if you are not the greatest dastard upon earth!" hissed Strathmore, his voice vibrating with the suppressed passion, which was worse in men of his blood than the darkest wrath of a more open and a quicker spent anger. "Prove it, I say, if it is not the vilest lie that jealousy ever spawned!"

"My God! it is the *truth* I spare you!"

The words wrung out from him, died on his lips too low to be overheard, as he forced them back to silence, by the might of a generous self-sacrifice which wrestled in conflict with a fiery temptation. He stood silent, stood to be branded as a liar! No other man would have uttered that word to Bertie Erroll and lived when the dawn rose.

Strathmore looked at him, in the uncertain shi-

mer of the moon that streamed fitfully between them through the boughs ; and he laughed, tauntingly, scornfully, imperiously, while a cold exultant light glittered in his eyes, and a haughty scorn sat on his lips.

“ You dare not ? I thought so. Fie, sir, for shame ! So this is cowardice as well as falsehood ? You play in a new *rôle* ! ”

The words cut through the air like the swift whirr of the sabre, and Erroll—stood silent still. The veins swelled to cords on his temples ; the blood left his face till it looked white and drawn like a corpse ; he struggled with a horrible temptation. A word uttered, a word held back : in this lay the whole gist of a great self-sacrifice, and of a great revenge ; in this lay the whole powers of his choice. With a word he could strike down the man who stood there in the yellow weirdly light, scorning, and taunting, and thrusting liar and coward in his teeth. With a word he could cast him out of the paradise where he had lain so long, cast him out of every one of its sweet hours, every one of its honeyed draughts ; with a word he could turn his exultant idolatry to loathing hate, to bitter shame. With a word ! And that word he was gibed and dared to utter !

It was a deadly struggle, but the past, with all its boyish memories, was closer knit about his heart than about the heart of him whose laugh was grating on his ear, and whose insults were falling on his brain like drops of fire. His head drooped, his lips

moved faintly, and he muttered like a man in his extremity :

“ God give me strength to keep silent ! ”

The words were very low, and were unheard, as the night-birds cleft the air with a rushing sound, and the winds rising swept up with a moan through the trees —the moan of the storm afar off.

A moment more, and he lifted his head with a gesture of proud grace ; he chose to endure insult, aspersion, wrong, rather than do what he held in his power to do now—lay the burden on the shoulders, and turn the steel back into the breast of the man who had been his brother in all save the ties of blood.

“ Since you deem it a falsehood, hold it one—watch your own treasure ! For the sake of the past, I let pass your words ; *I* can afford to be called a coward. Strathmore ! if we must part, let it be in peace.”

He held out his hand as he spoke, and his voice grew mellow as music ; the moonlight fell full upon his face, with its fair and fearless beauty, while his eyes were soft with the wistful, forgiving, lingering gaze of a woman. The look, the words, the action, should have unlocked a flood of olden memories and thoughts of youth, and should have swept away, as the light of morning sweeps aside an evil dream, all the dark and pitiless passions which a few seconds had been long enough to beget and bring to birth. But in the tangled web of Strathmore’s nature ran one hell-woven thread—in anger he was pitiless, in revenge relentless. With his sneer on his lips he signed aside

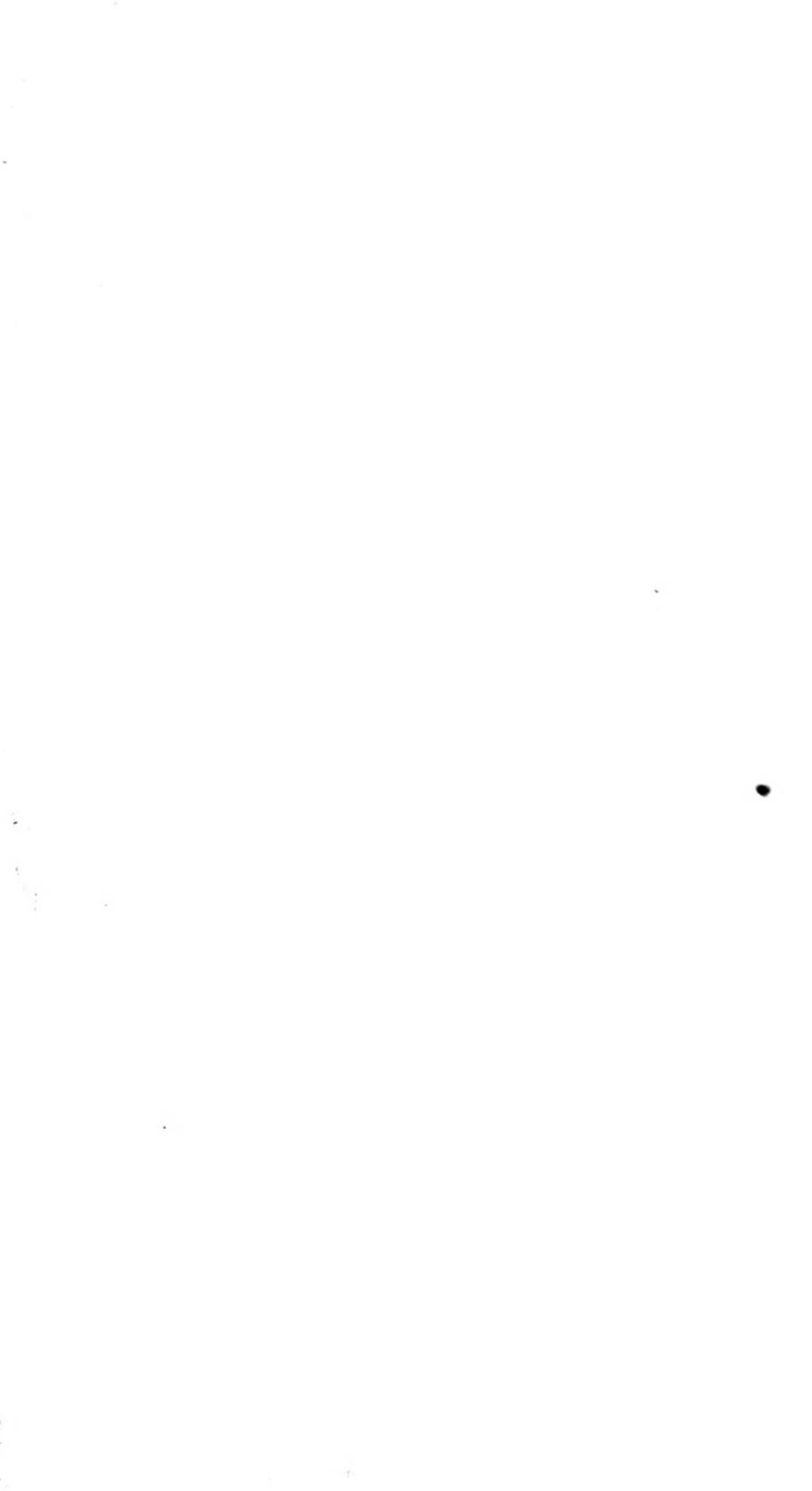
the offered hand, and in the ghastly light his eyes looked into those which met him with gallant fearlessness and wistful tenderness: but his own neither changed nor softened.

“ You might know me better—I never forgive !”

And with those brief, calm words he turned and passed across the sward, followed by Lady Vavasour’s spaniel. Once, when he had reached the marble piazza of the villa, he turned and glanced at the night, as he called the dog to follow him. Erroll was out of sight. There were only the heavy darkness, which hung like a pall above the earth, and the angry moon, gleaming blood-red where she glared through the mist. The roar of the winds was rising louder, and from afar off the thunder broke, subdued and sullenly.

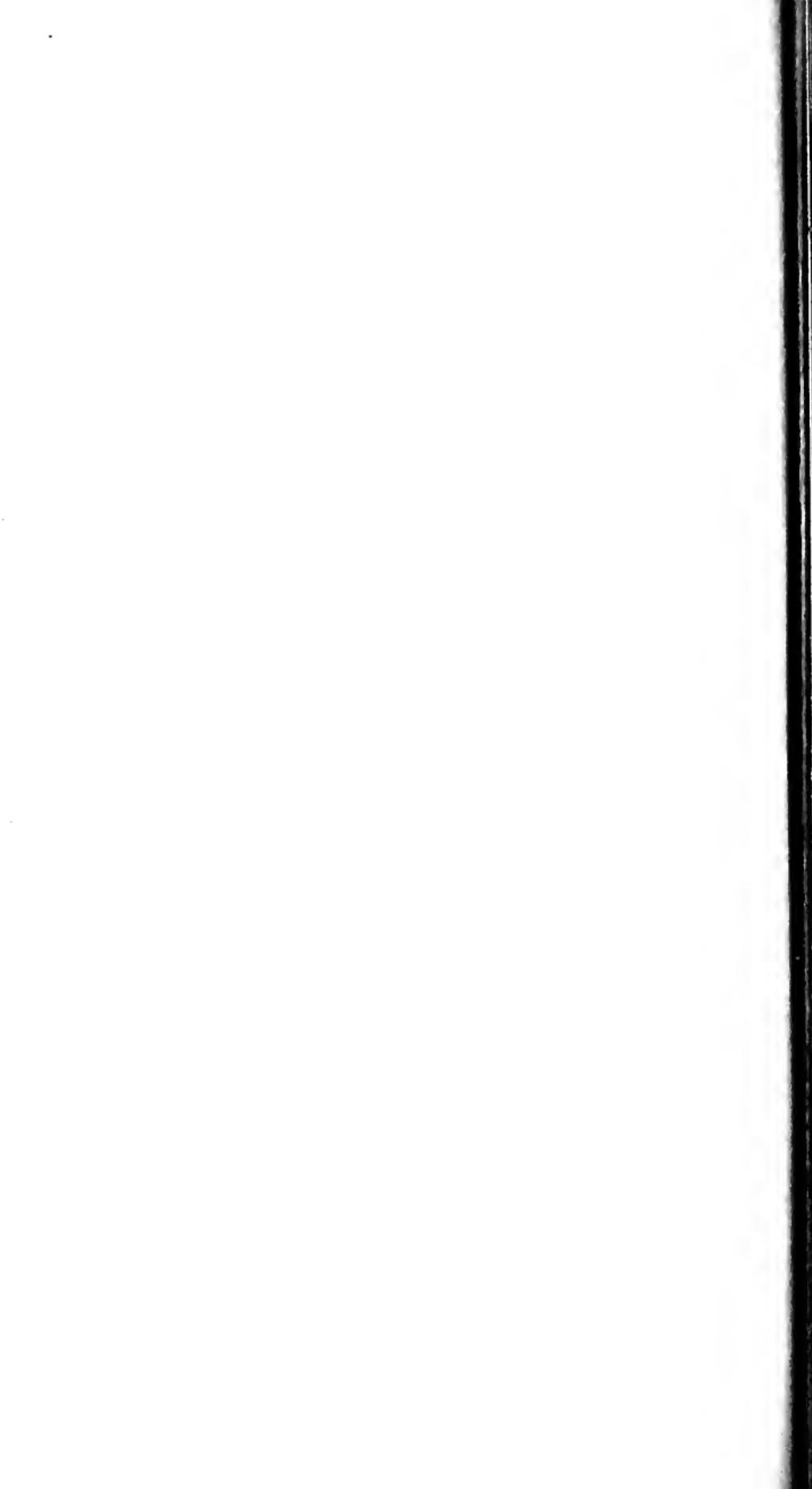
The storm was near at hand.

END OF VOL. I.











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